FROM RUSSIA TO OKLAHOMA: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

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FROM RUSSIA TO OKLAHOMA: A CASE STUDY OF

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PREFACE

This study is an attempt to examine in microcosm the impact of immigration in the development of Oklahoma by exploring the role played by the Russian immigrant in the early settlement of the state. A brief overview of the character of Russian immigration is offered first, and this is followed by three case studies of immigrant families from Russia who settled in Oklahoma.

This has been done for two reasons: to better enable the reader to understand the individual immigrant experience and to point out the importance of immigration upon the state of Oklahoma. The study concludes by examining the significance of the immigrant and pointing out the uniqueness of the individual immigrant experience. This is accomplished by an examination of certain contrasts and comparisons of the three families under consideration.

I wish to acknowledge and offer my warmest gratitude to the number of second generation Americans who spent countless hours describing the immigration experiences of a father or brother. These include Milton, Jake, and Mike May, who made the story of the Russian Jew in Oklahoma a reality. The efforts of Mrs. Martha Horn, Mrs. Wesley Ehrlich, and Mr. John D. Ehrlich are also appreciated.

I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to my major adviser, Dr. Douglas D. Hale, whose guidance and untiring dedication made this project possible. His contribution to this study and similar studies in the area of immigration cannot be overlooked, and his encouragement

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INTRODUCTION

> And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself.[1]

America has been called a nation of immigrants, a land of strangers, a melting pot for the peoples of the world, and many other expressions that in some way describe its migratory heritage. Lord Bryce once remarked that "America speaks with as many tongues as the waves of a boisterous sea".[2] However one may view America, it must be concluded that a vital part of her history centers around the immigrant and his story. In fact, a significant part of world history deals with mankind in motion.

If one is to understand the history of America, he must understand the composition of its two hundred million people. It is essential that we understand the heterogeneity of our population and the cultural, social, and economic forces that influence these groups. From 1820 until 1910, more than twenty-seven million people of various languages and diverse customs, representing different traditions and ideas, came to America.[3] Immigration to the United States was particularly heavy during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the years preceding the First World War, as millions were added to an ever increasing population. Clearly, these immigrants played a major role in determining the fortunes of America, yet it is a complex task to explain and analyze

that role.

It is the purpose of this study to examine the impact of the European immigrant in microcosm, by focusing upon three families who came from Russia to Oklahoma during the high tide of immigration. Each family represents a different minority within the Russian Empire, and their migratory experiences show many contrasts and similarities. The paper will look at these families and offer a brief description of other elements within the Russian Empire, in an attempt to point out the diversity of emigration and how this affected the United States, particularly Oklahoma. It is hoped that by looking at the personal lives of these immigrants, one may better understand the subject of immigration. Very little has been written about the subject of immigration in Oklahoma, yet its impact was very significant to the growth of the state. It is hoped that this importance can be explained by examining each family's role in that development.

Who was this stranger in a new land, and from where did he come? The immigrant was a landless peasant in search of new land in America; he was a man of strong religious conviction who hoped to escape persecution. Or perhaps he was a laborer in some European city who felt the pressures of an expanding population and depressed economy, or merely an adventurer to whom the frontiers of America seemed to provide excitement. The immigrant was essentially a nonconformist who forsook his native land in search of freedom and opportunity. Most of all, he was a person, a person whom most Americans know. For the immigrant is your grandfather or your great uncle, and his story is your story.

The American immigrant and his migratory path can be traced to the four corners of the earth, but in particular it was the European exodus

that provided the greatest magnitude to American immigration.

> American immigration in a sense may be said to constitute a chapter in the expansion of Europe, a movement which has been in process for over four centuries, beginning with the discovery of America by Columbus.[4]

By 1910 six European nations had distinguished themselves as particularly large donors. These included: Germany (5,351,746), Austria-Hungary (3,172,461), Russia (2,359,048), Ireland (4,212,169), Italy (3,086,356), and Great Britain (2,212,071).[5] The emigration from the Russian Empire was of particular significance from 1880 until 1910, during which time it was exceeded only by that of Germany, and its importance to the development of both urban and rural America cannot be overlooked.

If one is to understand himself, he must know from whence he came. This is especially true with the Russian element in the United States. To better understand it, we must look beyond our own shores and become knowledgeable concerning the conditions in Russia which led to emigration. The motives for emigration from the Russian Empire were as numerous and complex as the various ethnic groups which comprised the Russian Empire. This variety becomes apparent when one examines the seemingly contradictory nature of Russian emigration. Only four percent of the emigration from the Russian Empire was composed of the Russian language element, while ninety-six percent came from non-Russian linquistic groups. Numerically, the most important of these included Jews, Polès, Lithuanians, Germans, and Finns.[6]

What does motivate a person to venture from his homeland and travel halfway around the world to an unfamiliar country? The most common reasons included economic pressures, religious persecution, and political strife. The Russian immigrant experienced all of these, plus many that were peculiar to his particular ethnic group. Life in Russia during

the closing decades of the nineteenth century was filled with hardships brought on by economic stagnation. This burden was particularly felt by the peasant, who represented over eighty-seven percent of the entire population,[7] an exceptionally large rural population when compared to the other nations of Europe. The recency of the demise of serfdom and the slow pace of industrial development in the cities were probably the most important reasons for this highly unbalanced distribution of population, and this caused increasing problems for the Empire's economy. Many of the problems actually had their origin with the emancipation of the serfs. Though freedom from the landlord had been attained by the serf in 1861, his condition in many cases actually worsened. The landholding class exerted considerable influence in assuring that the peasant received minimal amounts of land. In fact, the emancipation served the economic interests of the government and the major landlords. Serfdom had become unprofitable for both. Emancipation would mean cheap labor for the landowners and increased revenue for the government, all extracted from the poor peasant.[8]

Not only was there an unequal distribution of the population between urban and rural areas, but also among various regions of the Empire. Russia as a whole was the most sparsely settled country in Europe, with a distribution of approximately seventeen persons per square mile. But in European Russia the population was more concentrated, with about sixty persons per square mile, and in the Polish area the number approached two hundred and thirty. This compares with fewer than two persons per square mile in Siberia and less than four in all of Asiatic Russia.[9]

This unequal distribution definitely was a problem, but no real

overpopulation difficulties need have arisen. It was the primitive agricultural system which was the real villain. Less than half the total amount of arable land was under cultivation. Over two hundred million acres lay idle. This was due partly to the three-field system of agriculture, but more importantly to the large landholdings vested in the church, the state, the imperial family, and the landed nobility. Five percent of the population owned one-third of the land. The small size of the peasant landholdings becomes more apparent when one looks at the growth of the population. From 1860 until 1910, a period of fifty years, the number of peasants increased from fifty million to eighty-six million, while the amount of available land saw comparatively little increase. This distribution of landholding created an increasingly larger landless class and affected the economy by driving wages downward and pushing rents upward.[10]

The antiquated system of cultivation and the country's failure to adopt more progressive agricultural methods further worsened the economic position of the peasant. This failure resulted in low productivity from the soil, with the yield per acre being considerably lower than that of other European countries. A comparison of Russian and German agricultural yields during the decade of the 1880's makes this apparent. Per acre, Germany produced three times as much wheat, over twice as much oats, and nearly two and one-half times as much barley. Furthermore, the Russian peasant was often subjected to harsh treatment, long hours, poor food, and an insufficient daily wage. Subsistance was at best all he could hope for.[11]

It was this economic condition that prompted the peasant to consider emigration, and it was the peasant population that provided the greatest

number to the migratory movement. As mentioned previously, the minority groups within the Russian Empire were chiefly responsible for this emigration, and some attention should be given to each group and their particular reasons for emigration.

One of the most significant minorities involved in the exodus from the Russian Empire were the Poles. The Kingdom of Poland had been created by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and was made a protectorate of Russia. Alexander I was recognized as her king, and policies were soon established to Russify the country. A Russian system of taxation and coinage was established by 1863, and Polish soldiers and officers were mustered into the Russian ranks.[12] Political and intellectual agitation, coupled with economic distress in the countryside and the city alike, ultimately led to an insurrection in 1863. This rebellion was brutally quelled, and more than 31,000 Poles lost their lives. A more determined Russification program was then initiated, often characterized by persecution and oppression. In 1864, the Kingdom of Poland was incorporated into the Russian Empire as the Vistula Provinces. By 1880, almost everything Polish was prohibited, and a methodical persecution of the Roman Catholic Church had begun. Many people were exiled to the frontiers of Siberia, and confiscation of ecclesiastical and private property became commonplace.[13]

These political circumstances and a succession of crop failures made the peasant's life unbearable. The idea of emigration was also encouraged by an increasing number of pamphlets, newspaper articles, and private letters which stressed the demand for labor in America. Private agents and steamship lines, such as the Hamburg-America Line and North German Lloyd also stimulated the emigrant movement.[14] The result was a

mass exodus of Poles from the Russian Empire. From 1820 until 1919, more than 900,000 Poles came to the United States from the Russian Empire. This represented twenty-eight percent of all Russian emigration.[15]

A similar situation existed in Lithuania. During the latter half of the nineteenth century the Russian yoke became unbearable for peasant and intellectual alike. Russification programs had actually begun in 1793, but became more severe after 1864, when an imperial ukase changed Lithuania into the Russian Northwestern Provinces. Total Russian domination was imposed, and in an attempt to Russify intellectual life, the University of Vilna was closed. Use of the Latin alphabet was prohibited, and use of the native language forbidden. Lithuanian laws were abolished and property seized. Furthermore, limits were placed on the amount of land a peasant could own. Due to the fear of confiscation of property and produce, cultivation virtually ceased and emigration began.[16] From 1899 until 1910, more than 465,000 Lithuanians left the Russian Empire, destined for America.[17]

The situation in Finland during the nineteenth century was somewhat different than that affecting the Poles and Lithuanians. Though some emigration did occur because of a worsening political relationship with Russia, the main reason centered around the system of landownership. This system had created an extremely large number of tenant farmers, and by 1900, there were approximately 200,000 landless peasants. The cry of "no land, no fatherland",[18] was an indication of what might follow. What followed was mass emigration to the United States. By 1920, some 380,000 Finns had made this country their new home.[19]

A study of Russian immigration would be incomplete without consideration of two other Russian minorities, the Jewish and the German, these

two elements were the groups chiefly responsible for initiating mass emigration. The Jews were the most numerically significant element to emigrate, and it was German emigration, particularly among the Mennonites, which set the stage for the wholesale emigration of other minority groups during the thirty years prior to the First World War.

The causes of Jewish immigration and its numerical importance deserve special attention. Jewish life was present in Russia as early as the fifth century, but the early Muscovite princes and tsars soon initiated a policy forbidding Jews to cross their border. But the beginnining of the Jewish question which so affected the Empire in the nineteenth century can be traced to the acquisition of Lithuania and Kurland in 1795. This acquisition was responsible for the incorporation of 900,000 Jews in the Empire.[20] The Jewish population had actually been encouraged into this area by the King of Poland to counteract the influence of the nobles, and it was said among the Jews that "whereas the Polish kings were the founders of Jewish rights, the Russian tsars were the founders of Jewish rightlessness".[21]

Before 1881, tsarist policy was one of vacillation regarding the Jews; it became, however, increasingly more onerous after the death of Alexander II in that year. Under Catherine II basic Jewish rights had been guaranteed, though a double tax was imposed upon the Jewish population. The policies of Alexander I were initially favorable. In 1804, the provinces of Astrakhan and Caucasia were allotted to the Jews for habitation in addition to the fifteen provinces known as the Jewish Pale. It soon became obvious why this policy had been established. After 1825, Jews were forbidden even a temporary residence in the interior provinces of the Empire. Certain large towns were proscribed

for the Jews, and the Polish Jews were forbidden to cross the Russian Empire. In an attempt to assimilate the Jewish element, a campaign was undertaken to Christianize the Jews. Children were taken to schools, and monetary rewards were offered for accepting Christianity.[22]

The ascension of Alexander II was to mark a new era for the Russian Jews. It was to be the era in which the Jews achieved equal rights with the rest of the population, and the more liberal policies of Alexander II seemed to fortify this hope. A Jewish petition concerned with civil privileges was received favorably in St. Petersburg, and the decade of the 1860's witnessed the removal of many restrictions. Educated Jews were given the right to live in any part of Russia and were permitted to participate in governmental service, including the right to take part in the local zemstvos.[23] Guild merchants were allowed to expand their trading enterprises and were able to choose their place of residence. The Jews were allowed to buy land in certain parts of the country, and other liberal policies were extended to the Jewish farmer and to the education of the Jewish child.[24]

With the assassination of Alexander in 1881, all Jewish hopes regarding equal rights ended. The Tsar's death had a traumatic effect upon the Jewish population, as described in the Russian-Jewish weekly, Razvet: "A squall passed through, thunder and lightning ... and then a stillness as though everything in nature had died".[25] The result was a more reactionary policy toward minority groups in general and the Jews in particular. A secret terrorist organization had been responsible for the assassination, and only one Jewish woman played a minor role in the plot, but the Jews were held to blame.[26] Forty-five days after the assassination, the first pogrom against the Jews was staged in Eliza-

bethgrad, with the invasion of a synagogue and the desecration of the holy scrolls. These attacks upon Jewish property soon spread to other towns and villages and were openly encouraged by the tsarist government. The decade of the 1880's was particularly difficult, with almost every Jewish community being attacked. In Warsaw, a particularly destructive pogrom lasted for three days before Russian officials intervened. Forty-five Jews were killed by a similar attack in the city of Kishenev, and again officials refused to intervene until the damage was done.[27] Attempts at self defense led to greater violence. As an aftermath of the disastrous Russo-Japanese War, this mob violence intensified. Within a fifteen-month period beginning in 1905, over six hundred pogroms occurred, affecting 162,000 Jews. Almost one thousand people were killed, and the estimated damage to property was approximately fifty-four million rubles.[28] The degraded spirit of the Jews and their precarious position were obvious.

> In the morning the people were awaiting the coming of the evening, and in the evening they were anxious that the morning should come....The sound of a shaken leaf made them frightened and they lost all trust in life.[29]

This terrorism represented only one aspect of the Jewish problem. The pogroms were coupled with further restrictions upon civil liberties. The Jewish policy of Alexander III can be generously characterized as "restrictive". In 1882, the onerous "Temporary Laws" were passed, imposing limitations upon Jewish habitation, occupations, education, and government. The Jews were forced off the land and forbidden to buy or even rent land. Furthermore, Jews were restricted to residence within the Jewish Pale, a collection of fifteen provinces that included ten provinces in Poland, White Russia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, and Nova-

rossa.[30] Outside of this area, only certain privileged Jewish groups were allowed to live. Kiev, the most important industrial center in the Ukraine, was closed to Jewish habitation, as was the largest resort area, Yalta. Restrictions were also placed on occupations. Not only were the Jews excluded from farming, but from professions connected with state services as well. Limits were also placed on the number of doctors and lawyers within the Jewish population. This resulted in distressing economic conditions. Unemployment was extremely acute, not because there was no work for men to do, but because they were forbidden to work in places where work was waiting to be done. Obstacles were no less formidable in areas of education and government. Only ten percent of an educational institution's student body could be comprised of Jews, and Jews met considerable opposition when they attempted to establish private schools. By 1892, the Jews were banned from the zemstvos, and Jewish representation in town corporations was limited to ten percent, regardless of what proportion of the population they composed.[31]

Year by year, the list of restrictive laws grew. In 1886, the number of Jews admitted into educational institutions was limited. The following year, the provinces of Rostov and Tanganrog were closed to Jewish residence, and Finland, too, was placed off-limits in 1888. In 1895, Jews were prohibited from giving their children biblical names and were excluded from the Yalta region. Before it was all over, more than six hundred restrictive laws controlled their every movement. Virtually no civil liberties existed, yet the government still expected the Jews to meet such obligations as military service and taxation. Ideas of reform were brought up on a number of occasions, only to be defeated. The only alternative was emigration.

Faced with a hostile government which was determined to undermine even their partial rights and surrounded by an inflamed population and a uniformly unfriendly press, the Jews found themselves in a hopeless situation. Emigration became a serious issue of debate among the population. The official Jewish Weekly, Razvet, initially took an unfavorable position toward emigration:

> Shall we flee because of the savage shouts, 'Beat the Jew!' Shall we move out in masse? Shall we desert the skies which witnessed our birth and the earth under which are buried our fathers who suffered not less than we did?....The Jew shall remain in Russia...because Russia is his fatherland, the soil of Russia his soil, the sky of Russia his sky. The Jewish problem is a Russian problem.[33]

But this attitude began to change because of the repressive policies of Alexander III and his Minister of Interior, Nicholas Pavlovich Ignatiev. Ignatiev's statement that "the Western border is open to the Jews" did in no way discourage the exodus which soon followed.

In 1882, wholesale emigration of the Russian Jews began, and the United States became the greatest single recipient of this migration. An explanation as to why America became their choice is probably best understood by examining the Jews' position in Europe. That position was one of insecurity, as anti-Semitic ideas were prevalent in most of the capital cities of Europe. This is expressed well by one Russian Jew. "Our status is shaky, not only here in the land of utter darkness, but also in Germany, the land of science and reason".[34] The promises of a land where freedom and opportunity existed further prompted this decision. Receiving aid from such organizations as the Jewish Colonization Association and from many private donations, the emigration of the Russian Jew became one of the most significant movements in the

migratory history of man. In 1800, approximately three thousand Jews lived in the United States. By the outbreak of the First World War this number approached four million.[35] Between 1880 and 1910, more than 1.1 million Jews from the Russian Empire came into the country, and New York City had more Jews than had ever been concentrated in any one place since the beginning of time.[36]

Another significant minority to emigrate from the Empire was the Russian-German. The German element in Russia was the result of a generous foreign colonization program initiated by Catherine II. During Catherine's reign, a vigorous foreign policy had been responsible for extending the Empire's boundaries to encompass over two hundred thousand square miles of new territory.[37] For military security and economic profits, she offered an extensive program to encourage foreign colonization of this new frontier. In a proclamation of 1762 entitled "Instruction to the Commission for Drafting a New Code of Laws", Catherine stated that owing to insufficient population and the existence of large tracts of land that were neither inhabited or cultivated, encouragement should be increased to lure farmers to Russia.[38]

An examination of the ten provisions makes it easy to understand the decision of many European peasants to immigrate. They were as follows;

(1) All people of foreign countries are invited to come to Russia and settle wherever they please, and are promised the right to pursue their professions and occupations.
(2) All people are to have freedom of religion and the right to build churches and schools, and the right to have priests and ministers who can direct and guide their spiritual and intellectual life.
(3) All those without means will be furnished the necessary money to travel to a port of immigration to Russia and there they will receive money deferring

all expenses until they reach their destination in Russia.

(4) After arriving in Russia, all the needed money for livelihood and for homes will be loaned, interest free, by the government. This money is to be paid back within ten years in three installments.

(5) All who settle on the Volga River in colonies are to be exempt from taxes for a period of thirty years. Others are to be exempt for a period of five years.

(6) All who settle on the lower Volga have a right to choose their own form of government; the only requirement being that they submit to the prevailing civil law.

(7) All settlers with money are not to be taxed if they use the money to establish themselves or for their personal wants.

(8) All male immigrants are to be exempt from military service for an indefinite period.

(9) The government encourages the establishment of mills and factories by giving them a tax free status for a period of ten years.

(10) All immigrants who settle in Russia are at liberty to leave at any time subject to a tax upon the property they own at the time.[39]

By far the most important element to take advantage of this offer was the German farmer, especially the Mennonite element. In fact, a Russian agent named George von Trappe was specifically sent out to seek colonists, and his findings led him to believe that the prosperous Mennonite farmers provided the perfect ones. These recommendations were made to Catherine, and Catherine soon followed by offering further concessions to the Mennonites if they would settle in Russia. Catherine felt that the Mennonite farmers would be an asset to the economic interests of the Empire. Her liberal terms included the following: (1) full religious toleration; (2) military exemption; (3) sixty dessiatines (175 acres) of land for each family; (4) free use of the Crown forests; (5) tax exemption for ten years; (6) a monopoly of the distilleries and breweries within each settlement; (7) free transportation from Prussia to Russia; (8) a loan of five hundred rubles to each family; (9) and

support for each family until the first harvest.[40] After the death of Catherine, Tsar Paul gave the Mennonites a written guarantee of these rights, thus encouraging further immigration.

These groups were prosperous, and before long the whole southern Volga area became dotted with German and Mennonite colonies. They used superior farming methods and techniques and approached their trade with more ambition than did the Russian peasant, and it was hoped that the new immigrants might set a good example for the Russians. By 1870, approximately two percent of the population within the Russian Empire was German by language.[41] But this group established no political or national loyalties to Russia. Under special colonial privileges, they remained unassimilated into the Russian culture. Removed by several generations from their homeland, they were almost a people without a country, and it was the Russian-German element that actually initiated the emigration movement within the Empire.

The most important motivating factor in the German emigration was the Imperial Ukase of 1871. The special privileges which Catherine II had awarded German colonists in 1763 were suddenly revoked. The loss of local autonomy threatened non-Mennonite and Mennonite villages alike. The greatest jolt was the revocation of military exemption, one of the chief inducements Russia had offered the war-weary German farmer. This especially affected the Mennonites, whose fundamental religious philosophy was based on the idea of non-resistance. The Mennonites suggested a money payment as a substitute for this program but this was refused. The program of special privileges had been replaced by a new policy of Russification. Simply, it was designed to assimilate all the inhabitants into "one land, one language, one people".[42] Further attempts at Russi-

fication were made by Alexander III in 1881, when he commanded that German colonists be removed from the frontier and resettled in more populated areas.[43]

Certain economic problems had actually preceded the government's "Russification program". This economic problem centered around the inheritance of land. It was a traditional practice that the nearest male heir assumed ownership of the land upon the death of the owner. This, coupled with a government regulation of keeping the entire estate in tact, caused the rapid growth of a landless class. The German and Mennonite elements attempted to ease population pressures by purchasing new colonies, but the problem still existed in 1870, with two-thirds of all family heads landless, and three percent of the population owning thirty percent of the land. This inequity caused the landless to organize and petition the Russian government for relief. Some relief was given by breaking up the estates, but it also meant intervention on the part of the Russian government.[44] Emigration elsewhere seemed the only alternative, and the United States received more than 100,000 Russian-Germans in the thirty years prior to the First World War.[45]

The only other major element to contribute a significant number to Russian emigration was the Russian nationality itself, but it is important to note that the Russian element was the least numerous group. Only four percent of the emigrants leaving the Empire were Russians, and this total is somewhat inflated, since Ukrainians were figured in with the Russian nationality.[46] Their decision to emigrate resulted primarily from the deplorable economic conditions mentioned previously, and was little affected by political or religious motivations.

Before examining the character of Russian immigration within the

United States, brief attention should be focused upon the Russian government's response to emigration. Russian law did not recognize the legality of emigration, though at times this policy was modified to encourage the exodus of the Jewish element. Since emigration was not recognized, no early records were kept, but the German element, and in particular the Mennonites, provided the largest number of emigrants before 1885.[47] To discourage emigration, the Russian government drew up a code of laws in 1888 concerning the punishment of Russian subjects who left their native country without permission. These laws are summarized below:

> Article 328. Whoever persuades any Imperial subject to emigrate beyond the frontiers of Russia, is liable as punishment to the loss of all his personal [sic], and according to the rank he has acquired, rights and preferences and to be transported to live in Siberia, or is delivered to the military correctional company.... But if the persons who have been persuaded to leave their native country prove to belong to the military service..., then the offenders are sentenced to forfeit all their rights and are condemned to live in a colony of malefactors in Siberia.
>
> Article 947. The offender...is punished according to the number of persons he has succeeded in persuading to leave, he is liable to the loss of part of his rights and privileges and to imprisonment from eight months to one year...or is transported to Siberia.
>
> Article 948. Those persons who have resettled and are living in another place, are liable to be imprisoned for the space of from two weeks' to three months' time. In case of the resettling of a whole family, the punishment falls, according to this law, upon the head of the elders of the family.[48]

These laws had a negligible effect upon continued emigration. The report filed by the United States Consul at Odessa in 1888 attests to this fact. "Forty thousand Jews have left Russia in the past twelve months despite the governmental enforcement of laws prohibiting emi-

gration. Their primary destination is the United States."[49] Similar reports were received by the American Consulate at Warsaw. Migration to America had begun.

Russian immigration to the United States had been insignificant before 1871, with fewer than four thousand Russian-born individuals in the American population. Most of these had come by way of Alaska. There were a handful of Russians scattered along the west coast of the continental United States and but seven Russian churches and thirty-five chapels in all of North America.[50] But the decade of the 1880's brought forty thousand more Russian immigrants to our shores, and by 1920, more than three million people who had been born in Russia were residing within the United States.[51] Their importance as an immigrant group was exceeded only by that of Germany; they represented 12.8 percent of the total foreign born within the United States in 1910.[52]

The first group in the Russian Empire to think of the United States as a desirable place to live were the Russian Germans. Once they arrived in the United States, they tended to settle in the central plains area and became a great factor in the agricultural progress of Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.[53] The next group to leave, and by far the most important group, were the Jews. It was the progress of the Russian Jew, the Volga Germans, and the Russian Mennonites within the United States that prompted other groups within the Empire to emigrate.

Part of their success can be attributed to the various skills of these three groups and their ability to adjust in a new land. The Jewish element settled in the larger cities along the Eastern seaboard and were able to adjust rather quickly to urban industrial life because of the

high percentage of skilled laborers among the Jewish emigrants. The German element usually went into agriculture, and through untiring industry and the adaptation of prolific strains of kubanka and arnautka wheat brought from the steppes of Russia, they too prospered. Another insight into the success of these groups centers around the immigration itself. The German and Jewish elements tended to immigrate as whole families with full intention of remaining in the United States. For example, forty-three percent of all Jews leaving the Russian Empire were women. This compares with only fifteen percent for the Russian-speaking emigrants to America.[54]

The other ethnic minorities of the Russian Empire soon followed the example set by the German and Jewish elements. The great bulk of these immigrants settled in the North Atlantic and North Central States, especially New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. In 1890 ten thousand dissenters of the Russian Orthodox Church arrived almost in a body and located in the Dakotas. Other scattered settlements might be found within the United States. A group of Molokans (Milk Drinkers) settled in California, and a number of Lithuanian settlements dotted the Midwest.[55]

Most of the Russian immigrants experienced early poverty, especially the Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian elements. This is attributable to their previous economic status, since these minorities had the highest percentage of peasant population and the highest illiteracy rate. Only five percent of these immigrants arrived in the United States with more than fifty dollars. But the expanding industrial centers within the United States offered them work; eighty-seven percent of the Russian immigrants remained in the urban areas. Though the immigrant had not

found Paradise, he had definitely come a step closer.[56] Those who settled on the land often experienced early setbacks, but continued effort usually yielded the Russian farmer a profit.

Broken down into ethnic groups, the number of immigrants from the Russian Empire to enter the United States between 1899 and 1910 are as follows: Jews (765,531), Lithuanians (468,774), Poles (471,378), Germans (100,817), Russians (77,321), Scandinavians (13,624), and others (3,481).[57] To further enlighten the reader, Table I presents an enumeration of the Russian born within the United States by state.[58]

TABLE I

NATIVES OF RUSSIA IN THE UNITED STATES (1900)

Number In Each State					
Maine	1,021	Florida	220	Mississippi	414
New Hampshire	722	Ohio	8,203	Louisiana	692
Vermont	377	Indiana	1,215	Arkansas	276
Massachusetts	26,963	Illinois	28,707	Oklahoma (Including Indian Territory)	2,849
Rhode Island	2,429	Michigan	4,138		
Connecticut	11,404	Wisconsin	4,243		
New York	165,610	Minnesota	5,907	Texas	2,259
New Jersey	19,745	Iowa	1,998	Montana	394
Pennsylvania	50,959	Missouri	6,672	Idaho	124
Delaware	380	North Dakota	14,979	Wyoming	90
Maryland	11,301	South Dakota	12,365	Colorado	2,938
Wash. D.C.	807	Nebraska	8,083	New Mexico	99
Virginia	1,242	Kansas	11,019	Arizona	107
West Virginia	721	Kentucky	1,076	Utah	119
North Carolina	253	Tennessee	927	Nevada	27
South Carolina	316	Alabama	468	Washington	2,462
Georgia	1,232	Oregon	1,753	California	2,421

The most noticeable aspect of these figures is that they show that the Russian immigrant was represented in every state and no doubt played a role in the development of each state. The remainder of this paper is devoted to better understanding the impact of the Russian immigrant upon the development of one such state, Oklahoma.

Their role cannot be understood completely without first considering some of the salient features in the opening of Oklahoma to white settlement. The story of the contest for these lands is fascinating. The desire for unoccupied lands in Indian Territory created an army of clamoring settlers along border areas who demanded the lands be opened to settlement. This group was encouraged by the railroads, which argued that some fourteen million acres of public land within Indian Territory should be subject to homesteading. This led to the formation of a number of parties who sought to force the issue by actually attempting to settle in the territory. The most prominent figure of this period was David Payne, who became the leader of the "Boomers". Repeatedly, groups led by Payne entered the territory only to be ejected by federal authorities. Payne died and the movement subsided for a brief period. But the "Boomers" regained their optimism with the extension of the Santa Fe Railroad into Indian Territory.[59]

From 1885 to 1889, Boomer attention was focused on that strip of land referred to as "No Man's Land". This land had been surrendered by Texas in 1845 because of the Missouri Compromise, which did not permit slavery north of thirty-six degrees. The southern boundary of Kansas was established at thirty-seven degrees, and this left a strip of land thirty minutes in width which was referred to as "No Man's Land". The Indian had no claim to this land, and it was largely used by the cattle-

men for grazing purposes. By 1887 some six thousand people had entered this unorganized territory and attempted to create some semblance of order by establishing their own government, the "Territory of Cimarron".[60]

The Territory of Cimarron was short lived, as the Unassigned Lands were opened by the provision of a "rider" on the Indian Appropriation Bill of 1889. Some one hundred thousand people--by wagon, train, horseback, and foot--raced into the area that eventually became Logan, Oklahoma, Cleveland, Kingfisher, and Payne counties. By nightfall of the first day, Guthrie had a population of 15,000 and Oklahoma City 10,000. The excitement of the opening is captured in this passage:

> Suddenly from the carbines of cavalrymen there came a puff of smoke. The crashing report of the guns was drowned in the mighty shout of the waiting thousands as they crossed the line. On they went in breathless haste.[61]

On May 2, 1890, the Organic Act was passed, legally establishing Oklahoma Territory and providing a form of government for the new land. Treaties were made with the Iowa, Sac and Fox, Pottawatomie, and Shawnee tribes which opened those reservations to settlement in 1891, and in 1892 the Cheyenne-Arapaho country was opened. The Cherokee Outlet was ceded to the government by the Indians in September, 1893. Land assignments in all these openings had been established by separate "runs". The final Indian lands (Kiowa, Commanche, and Caddo) were opened in 1901 and distributed by means of a lottery.[62] The influx of people into the newly formed Territory made possible by the "runs" greatly enhanced the chances of statehood, and on November 16, 1907, the Indian and Oklahoma Territories were admitted to the Union as the State of Oklahoma.[63]

Oklahoma became a promised land for the new settler, and it is not surprising that many of these early pioneers were part of the great im-

migrant movement that coincided with the opening of Oklahoma. By 1907, approximately eight percent of Oklahoma's population was either foreign born or the children of foreign born.[64] This had a significant impact upon the development of Oklahoma, yet it is an area that has received little attention. Though natives of Germany comprised the largest foreign-born population in Oklahoma, the Russian immigrants also contributed a significant number. By 1910, there were 5,807 Russian-born inhabitants in Oklahoma.[65] Table II provides an account of European immigration into Oklahoma by order of importance.[66]

TABLE II

EUROPEAN HOMELANDS AND THEIR FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN OKLAHOMA (1910)

Country of Birth	Number in Oklahoma	Percent of Foreign Born White Population
Germany	10,089	25.2
Russia	5,807	14.5
Austria-Hungary	4,236	10.6
England, Scotland, Wales	4,564	11.4
Italy	2,564	6.4
Ireland	1,800	4.5
Sweden	1,020	2.5
Others including non-European countries	10,007	24.9
	40,084	100.

The obvious motivating factors which prompted the immigrants to decide on Oklahoma were the free land openings and the homesteads made available through the Homestead Act. Through this act a farmer received one hundred and sixty acres of land for a sixteen dollar filing fee, and if he worked the land for five years it became his. Many of the immigrant farmers had settled in the Great Plains area only to find a scarcity of available land; after 1889, they took advantage of the opportunity Oklahoma offered. By 1910 some fifty-eight percent of Oklahoma immigrants were engaged in farming pursuits. The only other significant occupation was that of mining, particularly among the Italian population in Pittsburg and Coal counties.[67]

The character of immigration from Russia into Oklahoma was as diverse as had been the emigration from the Empire, but by far the most important of these minorities was the Russian-German, who represented three-fourths of the total Russian-born population of Oklahoma in 1910.[68] This German element can be divided into two distinct groups: (1) Mennonites and (2) other persons predominantly of the Lutheran faith.

The first Mennonite contact with Oklahoma came through the General Conference Mennonite missionary work of S. S. Haury among the Osage, Pawnee, and Sac and Fox tribes in 1876. This work was further extended to the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma Territory. Haury's work encouraged others, and within two years, fourteen Mennonites were in the Indian mission fields. To care for the physical and educational development of the mission field, a manual labor and boarding school was established at Darlington and a similar school for Cheyenne and Arapaho children was begun in the 1880's at Cantonment. The Federal Indian Agent, D. B. Dyer, commented; "It is no small compliment to the

devoted, charitable, and benevolent Mennonites to say they are the most earnest workers I ever saw engaged in missionary work". The Mennonite Brethren initiated work among the Comanches under the guidance of Henry Kohlfeld and secured permission to build a "Jesus House" from Quanah Parker. In 1891 the Mennoville Mennonite Church was established between Okarche and El Reno, becoming the first Mennonite church in the Territory.[69]

But it was the opening of the Cheyenne-Arapaho lands in 1892 that stimulated hundreds of Mennonites to settle in the area that became Blaine, Custer, and Washita counties, with their largest concentration in the area from Gotebo through Corn to Geary. The opening of the Cherokee Outlet in 1893 played a key role in the further growth of Mennonite life in Oklahoma, as settlements were established at Deer Creek, Enid, Fairview, Kremlin, Jet, Lahoma, Medford, Mena, and Orienta.[70] On the eve of statehood, there were twenty-four Mennonite bodies in Oklahoma with a membership that approached fifteen hundred.[71]

The non-Mennonite German element from the Russian Empire was also particularly significant in the settlement of Oklahoma. Predominantly this group had been Lutherans in Russia, but a number converted to the Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist Churches in America. Both the Lutheran and Seventh Day Adventist Churches had large memberships in Oklahoma territory, with 4,030 and 1,967 members respectively.[72] These groups were predominant in Garfield, Kingfisher, Canadian, and Ellis counties. Large concentrations of Russian-Germans settled in the Okeene area, but the densest area was around Shattuck in Ellis County. Another significant area of settlement was Texas and Beaver counties in the Oklahoma Panhandle.[73] Both German groups played a major role in the development

of western Oklahoma.

It is impossible to determine the precise numerical significance of the Russian Jew in the settlement of Oklahoma, since no exact statistics are available on this subject. But the Jewish element was an important factor in the growth of Oklahoma. The first known Jewish contact with the Oklahoma and Indian Territories was through a pioneer Jewish merchant family who had a general merchandising store at Ft. Smith. The first Jewish settlers entered Oklahoma after the Civil War, and were employed as suppliers and laborers for the first railroad through Oklahoma, linking Texas and Kansas. In 1867, a Jewish immigrant from Bavaria established a merchandising store at Muskogee. A number of Jews were responsible for building the Ardmore station of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad, and a permanent Jewish congregation was established in Ardmore in 1899. With the opening of Unassigned Lands in 1889, the number of Jews in Oklahoma increased significantly. Congregations were established in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Ardmore, Muskogee, Guthrie and Enid. By 1900 more than five hundred Jews had settled in Oklahoma, and by 1907 the figure had swelled to over one thousand, including some 145 immigrants, representing eleven different congregations.

From the beginning of Oklahoma Territory, Jews were prominent in public life as local merchants and public officials. Isaac Levy was elected to the first territorial legislature, and Leo Meyer became Oklahoma's first State Treasurer.[74] The Jewish community in Tulsa experienced considerable growth and prosperity primarily because of the oil business, and is now the largest and wealthiest congregation in the state. It would appear that German and Austrian Jews exceeded the number of Russian Jews in the state, but those from the Tsarist Empire

were an important factor, nonetheless.

The other elements (Poles, Lithuanians, and Russians) were also present, but were not as numerically significant as the Russian German. Until 1907, only ninety-two Russian Poles resided in Oklahoma, but 161 came in that year. Of the 1,301 Poles living in Oklahoma in 1910, approximately one-third had come from the Russian Empire. A Lithuanian community of approximately three hundred individuals developed in the mining towns between McAlester and Wilburton, as well as a few farming communities scattered throughout the state. The final element to consider is the Russian element, which also included a large number of Ukrainians. Approximately two hundred settled in the Hartshorne area in Pittsburg County and established a Russian Orthodox Church. This was only one of fifty-nine such congregations in the United States, and there are only four other such churches west of Oklahoma. A group of about forty Russian immigrants located in Oklahoma City, and another group located in the Enid area.[75]

In all, 5,807 immigrants from the Russian Empire had settled in Oklahoma by 1910. Table III and Map I show those counties where Russian immigrants settled.

The importance of immigration to the development of Oklahoma was substantial, and the Russian immigrant played one of the most significant roles in its early growth. But it is impossible to evaluate that contribution with any degree of accuracy. It is only through the lives of each individual immigrant that one becomes aware of the numerous contributions that were made. The personal story is often worth a thousand pages of sterile statistics, and it is hoped that the following chapters will make the immigrant what he was, a real person. In examining the

life of the individual immigrant, attention has also been given to the larger historical forces involved in an effort to better understand the Russian immigrant in Russia and in the United States. Because of the importance of the Jewish immigration to the United States and the significance of the Volga German and the Russian Mennonite in the early development of Oklahoma, representatives of these three groups have been chosen for this investigation.

TABLE III

NUMBER OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN BORN IN OKLAHOMA BY COUNTY (1910)

STATE	NUMBER	STATE	NUMBER	STATE	NUMBER
Adair	2	Grant	83	Nowata	1
Alfalfa	126	Greer	8	Okfuskee	2
Atoka	18	Harmon	0	Oklahoma	238
Beaver	79	Harper	52	Okmulgee	12
Beckham	20	Haskell	25	Osage	1
Blaine	547	Hughes	3	Ottawa	0
Bryan	2	Jackson	3	Pawnee	15
Caddo	114	Jefferson	9	Payne	119
Canadian	20	Johnston	2	Pittsburg	379
Carter	8	Kay	9	Pontotoc	12
Cherokee	0	Kingfisher	86	Pottawatomie	49
Choctaw	19	Kiowa	270	Pushmataha	8
Cimarron	3	Latimer	201	Roger Mills	4
Cleveland	5	LeFlore	5	Rogers	6
Coal	79	Lincoln	58	Seminole	0
Commanche	54	Logan	19	Sequoyah	0
Craig	0	Love	1	Stephens	5
Creek	18	McClain	18	Texas	239
Custer	144	McCurtain	13	Tillman	37
Delaware	0	McIntosh	0	Tulsa	21
Dewey	39	Major	466	Wagoner	4
Ellis	526	Marshal	0	Washington	19
Garfield	234	Mayes	2	Washita	820
Garvin	0	Murray	4	Woods	97
Grady	37	Muskogee	50	Woodward	120
		Noble	118		

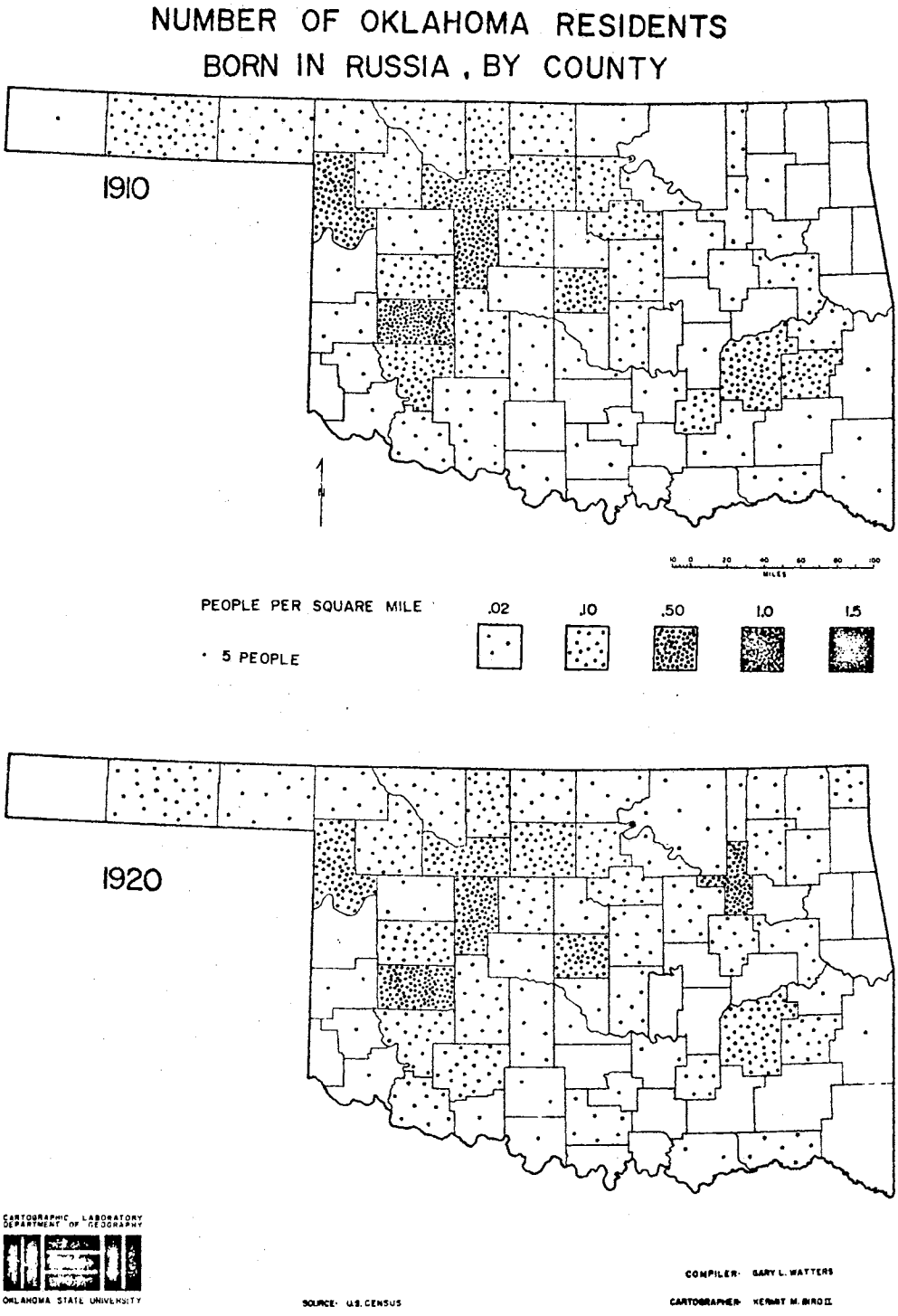

Figure 1. Dot Map of Russian Foreign Born in Oklahoma By County, 1910 and 1920.

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CHAPTER II

THE MAY BROTHERS: A STORY OF THE RUSSIAN JEW IN OKLAHOMA

> Give me your tired, your poor,
> Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
> The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
> Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me
> I lift my lamp beside the golden door![1]

These immortal words of Emma Lazarus inscribed on a tablet in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty have inspired millions of Americans since the statue was dedicated in 1886, during the high tide of immigration to this country. Almost twenty-eight million immigrants entered this country between 1820 and 1910,[2] representing nations from every portion of the globe. But Europe, and particularly Britain, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Russia were the greatest contributors to this exodus. The immigrants came for numerous reasons, but the most frequently cited motivations involved economic misery, political restrictions, or religious persecution facing them in the old country.

One group of immigrants who had suffered all of these hardships was the Jewish population of Russia. The epic of the Russian Jew, his plight in the Tsarist Empire and his freedom and opportunity in a new land is an often-told story. But the message bears repeating, for each experience was unique in its own way. Moreover, at a time of self-doubt and cynicism in this country, the reality of the promise of America may offer a useful corrective to excessive pessimism. This is one such

story out of many: how a Jewish family left everything behind in Russia to find hope, opportunity, and freedom in America.

The Statue of Liberty was only three years old when, in 1889, a Jewish father and son caught a glimpse of it for the first time as they approached the land of opportunity that waited beyond. Hyman and Ben Madanic could have had no idea what the future might hold in this strange new land, but confidently believed that it would be better than their past. Viewing the Statue of Liberty and setting foot in the new promised land must have been an awe-inspiring experience which caused many to drop to their knees and kiss the good earth beneath their feet, offering up prayers to God and rejoicing over the union of immigrant and his adopted country.

As Jews, Hyman and Ben Madanic were but two members of the most numerically significant group to leave the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. The Madanic family, though not wealthy, had lived comfortably in Russia and were considered a family of means. Unlike many members of the Jewish population, they had not been banned from the land and had been very successful as landowners and producers of timber and alcohol. The Madanic family lived in the "bread basket" of Russia, the fertile Ukraine, near the small village of Galena Gaberna, approximately one hundred miles south of Kiev.[3]

Hyman Madanic depended upon timber and alcohol production for his livelihood, but in 1889 an explosion and fire destroyed all his vats containing alcohol. Naturally, this seriously impaired his earning power for that year, but to make matters worse, he was visited by the Russian tax officials, who accused him of lying about his losses and concealing his profits. In vain, Madanic tried to convince the officials that a

real loss had definitely been incurred, but the collectors refused to believe him and taxed him heavily. It was at this point that Hyman Madanic decided to leave Russia, even though it would mean leaving behind everything he had worked for all his life.

Emigration was not officially recognized in Russia at that time, so Hyman felt it best that he and his sixteen-year old son, Ben, go to the United States alone. This left his wife, Hanna, and three younger boys, Max, Harry, and Paul, still in Russia. Later Hyman would arrange passage for the rest of the family to come to America. Madanic and his son were able to slip across the border separating Russia and Austria by the hiring of a guide. Though the two encountered little trouble in exiting Russia, it was necessary for them to swim a stream at the border. Hyman later recalled that it was so cold that young Ben slept with the guide's dog that night for warmth.

Though it would be impossible to trace the exact route of the Madanics' journey across Europe, it is probable that their first stop was at Brody, a little town on the Austrian-Russian border which had become a center of Jewish emigration during the decade of the 1880's.[4] Thousands of Jewish emigrants from Russia streamed into this small border town seeking assistance and passage to a new home. From there, many of these Jewish immigrants travelled by train to a north German port where they secured passage on some ship bound for New York. Though it is uncertain from what port Hyman and Ben departed, passage was secured in the steerage of a ship and the two were off for America.

The scene at Ellis Island must have been one of confusion when Ben and his father arrived in New York. Hundreds of immigrants arrived every day, speaking various languages and representing many different

cultures. It was at Ellis Island that the original name of Madanic was changed to Madansky. When father Hyman registered at Ellis Island he had written "Madansky", because so many other immigrants had added the suffix "-sky" to their name. The original name "Madanic" had represented the area in which the family had originated, Madan being the name of a river located on the Russian frontier in Persia, and the suffix -ic meaning "from". But the experience at Ellis Island changed that, and from 1889 until 1921, the family was known as Madansky.

Hyman and Ben Madansky settled down in the new country at St. Louis. The reasons behind the choice of this location cannot be ascertained, but it is probable that the city was recommended to them by Hyman's brother, who was living near Baltimore. After all, very few immigrants knew where they were going in this vast country. The story of two Jewish immigrants who happened to meet on a train best explains this geographical uncertainty. One immigrant inquired as to where the other was going, and was told "Chicago, and where are you going?" The first replied, "California". The second one then said, "Isn't America a wonderful country? You're going to Chicago, and I am going to California, and we are both riding on the same train!" Perhaps Hyman and Ben Madansky did not know where they were going but they knew from whence they came, and they faced the future optimistically.

Once in St. Louis, surrounded by foreign customs and a foreign language, they sought out the Jewish community where they might feel more at home. At this time, the city had a Jewish community of approximately four thousand members, and by 1900 an equal number of new Russian immigrants would be added to its population.[5] After renting a flat, they began the search for a job. Their first opportunity came in the clothing

industry, and it was this initial contact which would determine their future. Tailoring was as foreign to Hyman and Ben Madansky as the new country itself, but they soon showed themselves to be quite adept at the trade. Both father and son went to work for Schwab and Company Clothing manufacturers in St. Louis.

The type of industry in which the two labored carried the infamous label "sweatshop system", and was one of the social evils of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the garment trade, a manufacturer usually had an inside shop where all the cutting was done; then these pre-cut articles were usually given out in bundles to piece workers who would finish them in their homes. At the end of the day, the completed work would be returned to the manufacturer, at which time the employee would receive payment for his work. Thus the worker's apartment became a small factory. The victims of this sweating system were usually immigrants. Though there were members of almost all the immigrant groups involved in this sweat-shop system, by 1890 the Jews had come to dominate the clothing industry. The system usually meant hard work and low wages carried out in unsatisfactory living conditions.[6]

With sewing machine, ironing board, and a big heavy iron, Hyman and Ben set about to work in the new country. Hyman would press the clothes with the iron, and son Ben would then sew the material together. Oftentimes they would also set up tables and stalls on the street where they would sell socks, shirts and various other clothing items purchased wholesale from the manufacturer. It was not the most enviable occupation; Hyman did not like the new country, often complaining about the harshness of his work and lamenting the fact that his wife and children were still in Russia. But the young and enthusiastic Ben would not even

consider going back to Russia.

Through hard work and exceptional frugality, the two tailors were able to save enough to afford passage for the rest of the family to come to America. In the four-year interval since Hyman's departure, the Russian government had relaxed emigration regulations, and the remainder of the family experienced no problems in leaving Russia. In fact, they were even able to bring some of their silver with them. Thus in 1893, the wife and children of Hyman Madansky arrived in St. Louis. It was here that the last two Madansky children, Jake and Sarah, were born.

The enormous problem of coping with the strange language and culture tended to create a cohesive Jewish community in St. Louis. Several interesting stories relating to the Madanskys emerge from that community. Ben Madansky often worked with another immigrant named Battlestein, often sharing the same sewing machine. After several years in St. Louis, Battlestein decided that he would go to a place called Houston, after being told that Houston was a young town experiencing tremendous growth. This move resulted in good fortune, as Battlestein became one of the largest clothiers in the United States.

But perhaps the most significant event in the life of the Madansky family in St. Louis was Ben's marriage to Mary Somavich. She was also a Russian immigrant who had come to live with her sister in St. Louis. At thirteen, and quite alone, she had possessed enough courage to make the long sea journey in the steerage of the ship. Ben Madansky's first encounter with his future bride occurred when he saw her picture in a photographer's window. Ben thought her to be a very attractive young lady, and upon mentioning this to a friend who also knew Mary, the two became acquainted and began a courtship which resulted in marriage. In

Figure 2. The first family portrait of the Madansky family taken in St. Louis, Mo. in 1895.

Figure 3. Ben Madansky with his new bride, Mary Somavich Madansky, who was also a Russian immigrant.

later years, Ben would recall how they would spend many hours at the movies, sitting in the balcony and enjoying the new life in America.

Thus, at the age of twenty-one, Ben took an eighteen-year-old bride. Two Russian immigrants who had not known each other in Russia had met and married in St. Louis. The wedding was an elaborate affair conducted according to traditional Jewish ceremony. It was a marriage destined to last fifty-four years.

It was through his new bride that Ben got his real start in the clothing business. Mary's sister was married to a man named John Elman who had opened a number of stores in Missouri and Illinois, and he offered Ben a position managing these small retail clothing stores. The operation was set up in such a way that the proprietors would take in a stock of merchandise, sell it, and then move to another town. It was just such a venture that brought Ben Madansky to Omaha, Nebraska, where his first son, Sol, was born on June 19, 1896. Ben was now a family man with new responsibilities, and it was at this time that he decided to open his own clothing store.

He chose Fairfield, Illinois, a sleepy little farming community of about 3,000 people, as the site of his first venture as his own boss. Purchasing a small "racket" store, or "five and dime", Ben quickly converted it into a men's clothing shop and christened it "The Grand Leader" after a large St. Louis department store. Many small-town businesses borrowed the more famous names of large retail operations in those days even though there was no direct connection.

The rest of the family joined Ben in Fairfield, and the operation soon became a family enterprise that prospered moderately despite the smallness of the community. J. F. Madansky, the youngest of the Madansky

Figure 4. The original Madansky Store, opened in 1896, and christened "The Grand Leader".

brothers, remembers fondly his boyhood days in Fairfield. The family lived in a large two-story home located one block from the schoolhouse. In a small community like Fairfield, it was possible to have the advantages of town life and those of rural life as well. There was a large barn located behind the house and a corral where the horses were kept. The summer meant picnics, horse and buggy rides, and that favorite American pastime, baseball. The Madanskys had become Americanized very rapidly, but they had worked at it. They placed a tremendous value upon education and had rapidly learned not only the English language but the American customs as well. It is said that Ben Madansky spoke without any noticeable foreign accent, and the entire family dedicated themselves to education and progress.

The business in Fairfield prospered, and the family success can probably be attributed to their hard work and honesty, their ability to become part of the community, their compassion for others and their practice of never turning down a worthwhile charity. The fact that there were few prejudicial attacks against their Russian heritage and Jewish faith was doubtless due to their congenial ways. They continually strove to be an integral part of the community and found acceptance in the new land to be what they had anticipated.

With the Fairfield store prospering, the family opened up two new stores at Granite City and Madison, Illinois. Paul Madansky remained in Fairfield; Grandfather Hyman Madansky and sons Max and Harry opened up the store at Granite City in 1904, while Ben opened the store in Madison. Though the Madison store was very small, it was run very efficiently by the eldest of the five brothers.

While in Illinois Ben's wife had borne him two more sons, Sam and

Milton. Milton recalls the town of Madison and his father's store with mixed memories. Every morning Ben would put out the collar styles near the entrance of the store. In those days, collars were not attached to the shirt. The customer bought his favorite style of collar separately, and then could attach it to the shirt. These collars were displayed in a small case about two feet long and eight inches wide and hung out in front of the store to attract customers. Madison was just a small community of steel-rolling mills that made the various parts for the flat cars of railroads. It was a rough town with many saloons. The labor force that worked in these rolling mills was comprised of Polish immigrants, and ironically, it was these Polish immigrants rather than the native Americans who usually made a derogatory comment concerning the nature of the Madansky background.

The Madansky family had been moderately successful in their Illinois businesses, but in 1908 certain events prompted their decision to sell out and move to a new state, Oklahoma. The brothers had first heard of the place from a lawyer who occupied an office above the Fairfield store. After a trip to Tulsa to visit relatives, the lawyer had come back to Fairfield with enthusiastic tales about the oil boom and told the Madansky family that business would be great there. Not long afterwards, two women told them essentially the same story and encouraged the young, ambitious Madansky brothers to move to Oklahoma and take advantage of the tremendous growth the new state was experiencing. Thus, in the fall of 1908, Max and Harry went to explore the possibilities of establishing a new store in Tulsa.

The brothers found the city to be just as exciting as their lawyer friend had predicted. Business was booming, and Tulsa and the surround-

ing areas were experiencing remarkable growth. The reason for this excitement was oil. Tulsa's famed Glenn Pool, the fields around Bartlesville and Osage County, and the oil discoveries in the Muskogee area presented abundant opportunities for pioneering men. In 1907, the Glenn Pool field alone produced over forty-three million barrels of oil. This type of "boom" activity saw Tulsa progress from a sleepy little Indian village of 1,300 people in 1890 to a progressive city of some 18,000 citizens twenty years later.[7] Because of this activity Max and Harry rented a store at 212 South Main and christened it the "Model Clothiers". This would be the first of five stores opened by the Madansky family in the young state.

Figure 5. The four Madansky brothers, from top clockwise, (Paul, Harry, Max, and Ben) at the opening of the Tulsa store in 1908.

From the very beginning, the Tulsa store was successful, and it was decided that the family enterprises in Granite City, Madison and Fairfield should be sold. From these proceeds, the Madansky Clothing Company was incorporated on January 27, 1910, in Granite City, Illinois, with a capital outlay of $30,000. The three hundred shares of stock valued at $100 each were issued among Hyman and his four eldest sons. Thus, with their accumulated $30,000 capital they came to Oklahoma.[8]

First impressions of Oklahoma were mixed. The youngest brother, J. F., was impressed with Oklahoma, especially the weather and the marvelous business activity which seemed to be thriving. Ben's youngest son, Milton, who was only six at the time, remembered the dirt streets and how the Indians, dressed in their native costume, frequented the town on Saturday. Saturday was always a big day for the Tulsa and Bartlesville communities, the day when everyone came to town, and that meant business for the young thriving store in Tulsa, and the new one which would soon be opened in Bartlesville.

Because of the success of the Tulsa store, the Bartlesville store was opened up in the fall of 1910. Bartlesville was, at that time, a city of about 6,000 people, but the bustling oil activity and boom atmosphere meant that nearly two-thirds of the population were men, an ideal situation for a men's clothing company. The store was begun on the original site of one of Bartlesville's oldest hotels, the Rite-way. It had been moved to a different location because William Johnstone, one of the founding fathers of Bartlesville, had planned the construction of a new building on the site. The Madansky brothers were having difficulty acquiring a suitable location in Bartlesville, when it was recommended that they inquire about the new Johnstone building. Finding

the owner, the Madansky brothers closed the deal, and the Madansky Clothing Company of Bartlesville was formed.[9] A number of clothing stores, including the Master's Clothing Store, the Unger Clothing Company, and the C and S Totters Haberdasher Shop were already doing business in the Bartlesville community,[10] but the Madanskys' venture proved to be rewarding. The success of the Madansky family is shown by the simple fact that the Bartlesville store has been in operation for sixty-four years, and is the state's oldest men's clothing retail establishment still doing business in the same location and under the same family ownership.

The secret of much of this success can be partially understood by examining the excellent business climate present in the Bartlesville community, but it must also be attributed to the innovative nature of the Madansky brothers. The store was established by Ben Madansky with the slogan "the customer is always right" and by inaugurating a "one price system". During the early part of the twentieth century, business activity was conducted in an atmosphere of bargaining and haggling over the price. The concept of one established price for an item was a relatively new one, but one which was to prove successful for the Madanskys.

Though Ben Madansky opened and established the Bartlesville store, it was the youngest of the five brothers, Jake Madansky, who would become its manager. He was only seventeen when the Bartlesville store opened, and before becoming actively involved in its management, Jake attended the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce at the University of Pennsylvania. When World War I broke out, Jake enlisted and became the first member of the Madansky family to serve the nation in a military capacity. He rose from the rank of corporal to second lieutenant in the

quartermaster corps and served for some time in France before coming home. Upon his return he assumed the position of manager of the Bartlesville store.[11] It was through his guiding hand that it became one of the more successful Madansky endeavors.

The Tulsa store proved to be successful during the period just prior to World War I and continued to be the basis of the Madansky brothers' assets. These were good times for the family. God had blessed them with great abundance in their new homeland. In 1913, two prosperous stores were carried on under the Madansky brothers' name, and the family cohesiveness seemed to be part of the Madansky tradition. Milton Madansky, who had been born in Fairfield, Illinois, in 1903, remembers the many excursions taken from Bartlesville to Tulsa. The Ben Madansky family purchased their first automobile, a Hupmobile, in 1913, when Milton was ten. No doubt it was the "hottest" thing on the road, but the fifty-mile journey to Tulsa was still an all-day drive. Following the path known as the Hockaday Trail, named after an automotive supply distributor, the journey to Tulsa led through farms and pastures, across creeks and dry stream beds. Naturally, the driver had to secure permission from the various farmers along the way and be sure to stop and close the gates so as not to let the livestock escape. The all-day journey was physically exhausting, and Milton complained of headaches on every trip.

Continued success prompted the Madansky brothers' expansion to Oklahoma City in 1916. Upon arriving in Oklahoma City, Ben leased a building at 225 West Main that had formerly housed the Scott Drug Store. Though it was an old building in need of repairs, it offered the perfect setting for a retail clothing store. It had a fifty foot frontage on

Figure 6. The interior of Madansky Brothers new store in Oklahoma City, 1916.

Figure 7. All five Madansky Brothers (circa 1910). Standing are Jake, Harry, and Max. Seated are Ben and Paul.

the street and ran all the way back to the alley; though it did not have a basement, it had a second floor which could be used. The secured lease was for fifteen years. The first ten years' rent would be placed at fifteen thousand dollars. This price reflected the highest rental paid on Main Street property in Oklahoma City up until this time, and Ben was somewhat concerned as to whether his decision would be justified. After investing a considerable amount in remodelling the store, it became one of the more attractive stores in Oklahoma City, and the prosperity of the twenties made Ben's investment a wise one.

The bustling business activity which characterized the early years of statehood had been generous to the Madansky family. Within eight years, they had opened stores in Tulsa, Bartlesville and Oklahoma City. This continued success led to the purchase of the New Phoenix Clothing Store of Muskogee in 1922. This particular business had been established before statehood and represented one of the oldest buildings in Muskogee. The group of prominent community businessmen who owned the building decided to sell, contacted the Madansky brothers and an agreement was reached. Paul, who was at that time in Oklahoma City, moved to Muskogee and became manager of the store. A kindly man who cared deeply for the feelings of others, Paul not only became a successful businessman, but one of the civic leaders in the Muskogee community, serving as President of the Kiwanis Club, President of the Oklahoma Retail Clothier's Association and director of many fund-raising drives for charities. The Muskogee store was maintained under his leadership for thirty-three years until his retirement in 1955. Paul then moved back to Oklahoma City, where he lived until his death in 1960.[12]

As the Madansky brothers moved into a new decade of prosperity in

the 1920's, they had already become prominent as the foremost men's clothiers in Oklahoma. Of the many developments which affected the firm during this decade, none was more significant than the changing of its name. On March 9, 1921, the Madansky Brothers became simply the May Brothers. The name was changed because of an embarrassing experience involving Ben Madansky, who had taken a trip to Mexico with a group from the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce to investigate the possibility of buying land for the purpose of growing citrus fruit. Upon returning from Mexico, Ben, alone of the entire group, was stopped, questioned concerning his foreign name and forced to show proof that he was an American citizen. This experience came at a time of intense nativism in the United States. The years 1919 and 1920 had witnessed the so called "Red Scare", a fear of radical or alien influence within the United States, which had been an outgrowth of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. The early twenties were also the hey-day of the reactionary Ku Klux Klan, which was not only directed against the Black, but Catholics, Jews, and immigrant groups as well. This embarrassing episode determined Ben to change his name when he returned to Oklahoma, and as the family leader, he persuaded his brothers to take this step of Americanizing their name. In a full-page advertisement published in the Daily Oklahoman on March 27, 1921, the Madansky brothers explained to the people of Oklahoma the reasons for the change. They wished

> to prove ourselves wholly American in every sense of the word....There has never been a time since we first came to the United States--more than thirty years ago--that we have not been Americans in heart and deed.[13]

As prosperity continued throughout the decade of the 1920s, the original May Brother's store in Tulsa, the state's first fifty-foot-

Madansky Brothers Americanize their name

To be known hereafter as May Brothers

WITH this announcement we take the final step to prove ourselves wholly American in every sense of the word. We have eliminated those parts of the name Madansky that are of foreign origin. We wish to forever renounce the name that reminds us of our foreign birth. From this date forward the individual members of this firm and their families will be known as May. Our stores in Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Bartlesville will be conducted under the name of May Brothers.

THIS may seem a radical step to those who know us personally and know of the Good Will and confidence we have built up for our former name. Some have counseled us against this action because of the respect in which the name Madansky is held wherever it is known. They have spoken of the many thousands of dollars we have spent to advertise our ideals, our principles and our methods, in the upbuilding of our businesses.

YET were it inevitable that we give up all the success that has come to us and again build our business from the very beginning, we would not hesitate to take the step we have decided upon. We do not believe such a course will be necessary. We believe that true Americans everywhere will accord us their full sympathy and will approve of our decision.

THERE has never been a time since we first came to the United States---more than thirty years ago---that we have not been Americans in heart and deed. We have appreciated possibly more than can you who never suffered under the heel of Russian Autocracy, the great privilege of being American citizens. We are daily thankful for the Liberty, Opportunity and Happiness that all may have in this land of Freedom.

NEED we add that there will be no change in our policies or methods. Nor will there be any change in the personnel of the firm. We will endeavor to merit an even greater degree of public confidence in and respect for the name May Brothers, upon those same principles that have brought us such a great measure of Good Will; principles that have in fact made this the largest clothing business in Oklahoma.

May Brothers

Figure 8. The advertisement which appeared in the Daily Oklahoman in 1921, proclaiming the Americanization of the family name.

front men's retail business, had steadily enlarged its assets. Under the guidance of Max and Harry May, it had been the main factor in the growth of the firm. Max was very much like Ben. Possessing a fine mind and having a reverent appreciation for America, he was another important leader of the May family and shouldered the responsibilities that were placed upon him in that position.

The growth of the Tulsa store prompted Max to undertake the construction of a new building which was to be five stories in height. Max anticipated the continued growth of Tulsa and the necessity for a larger establishment to cater to the increased patronage of their business. What Max did not anticipate was the stock market crash of 1929 and the Depression which followed shortly thereafter. Ben, essentially a conservative, warned against the venture, but the building was nevertheless undertaken at considerable cost to the firm. Built in the Spanish style it was considered the most modern retail clothing store in the state. With the onset of the Depression, however, the Tulsa store, having incurred heavy construction costs, was unable to adjust and was forced to close in 1934. The May Brothers had tasted defeat for one of the few times in their history. This business failure, though serious enough in itself, was eclipsed by the tragedy which followed. Max, despondent over the loss of the business and keenly sensitive to the responsibility he bore for the family, chose to take his own life.[14] Upon closing the Tulsa store, Harry moved to San Antonio, Texas where his son, Dr. Lester May, had established a medical practice. Here he spent the remainder of his days in retirement.

The Depression years were further darkened when Hyman, the patriarch and pioneer immigrant, passed away in 1932. But the other busi-

nesses in Bartlesville, Oklahoma City, and Muskogee were able to adjust to the hard times, though the family's net assets plummeted during the Depression years. Milton recalls how underwear was sold at twelve pairs for one dollar, men's socks at eighteen pairs for one dollar, shirts at a dollar each, and suits went for fifteen dollars.[15] But the businesses rode out the economic storm, and during World War II and the postwar era they were able to regain their financial position.

In 1932, during the height of the Depression, the Oklahoma City store changed its location. The original lease of 1916 expired during that year, and the landlord had attempted to double the amount of the rent. Locations were tight and all the rents were high, but Ben refused to yield to the increased demands of his lessor. With no place to go, the May Brothers clothing store in Oklahoma City closed until they could find a suitable location for the business. It was at that time that the First National Bank and Trust Company of Oklahoma City, located on the corner of Robinson and Main in the American National Building, announced their plans to move to a new location. Ben May made arrangements with the bank and leased its old building at 136-138 West Main. It was this site that served as the location of the May Brothers' store from 1932 until 1970.[16]

In 1945, Ben moved to share the management of the business with his three sons, Sol, Sam, and Milton. Having graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in journalism at the age of twenty-four, Milton decided to follow the family tradition in the clothing business. After buying out the interests of his two brothers, Milton emerged as the ultimate owner of the Oklahoma City operation. Under his guidance, May Brothers continued to grow, and in 1955, when Oklahoma City opened

its first shopping center at Penn Square, May Brothers opened a branch at this location. The two Oklahoma City stores continued to comprise a major part of the Oklahoma City business community until the retirement of Milton May in 1970.[17]

This left only the Bartlesville store, and it has continued in business to the present time. Under Jake, the youngest of the May brothers, it also prospered during the postwar period. The efficiency and success of the store can also be attributed to the efforts of Ben Stocker and Paul Early, who served the May Brothers firm a combined total of eighty-four years. Ben Stocker had married Sarah, the only May sister. Though Sarah passed away during the influenza epidemic following World War I, Ben continued as an associate of the May Brothers and was always considered one of the family.

The success of the store in Bartlesville can largely be attributed to Jake May's appreciation and enthusiasm for the community, which was often reflected through the medium of advertisements. In an ad of the 1940s, Jake declared, "We are happy to be alive in a world and a city so full of bright promise for the years to come".[18] Upon the fiftieth anniversary of May Brothers in October, 1960, a newspaper advertisement carried this testimonial:

> During every moment of these fifty years, we have been conscious of the responsibility your confidence has placed upon us. We have constantly striven to deserve this confidence by putting your interests first. Fifty down and fifty to go![19]

This type of appreciation was also shown by the active role that Jake May played in Bartlesville civic life. Jake served as a two-term district lieutenant governor of the Kiwanis Club, as well as President of the Bartlesville Chamber of Commerce. Like his brother Ben, Jake was also active in scouting, serving as a board member of the Cherokee Area

Council. He was a member of the Board of Directors of Bartlesville's first United Community War Fund Drive, served as chairman of the Washington County Community Fund Drive, and was a charter member of the Bartlesville American Legion.[20] As a fitting tribute to the man, February 18, 1970, was declared "Jake May Day" by the Bartlesville Kiwanis Club. Perhaps his son Mike, now the manager and major stockholder of the Bartlesville store, expresses his father's philosophy best. "The family over the years has deemed it a civic responsibility to give as much to the community as the community has given to them."[21]

Perhaps no member of this remarkable family lived up to this creed as fully as its recognized leader, Ben. As the eldest brother, he took the initiative and accepted responsibility for the family as a whole. It was he who maintained harmony and guided the business through its most difficult years. Besides his business acumen and his ability for leadership, he possessed an even more precious quality--the capacity for love. He genuinely loved people. Young men would come into the store and often be complimented on their wonderful smile or neat appearance, for this was the complimentary nature of Ben May. His genial good nature is also reflected in the equitable treatment of his sons. Milton remembers him as not only a father and guiding influence but also as a friend and true companion.

This capacity to give of himself to make others happy can be seen in his generosity and helpfulness. It has been said that Ben never turned down a deserving charity. His limitless generosity can best be shown by two examples. During the depression many of Ben's friends appealed to him for financial assistance. Unable to finance a business venture, they would come in and explain the situation to Ben. If he

Figure 9. Photograph of Ben May taken at the age of sixty-eight.

thought the proposal had merit, he would go to the bank with his friend, borrow the money, and co-sign the note with him. One of the best examples of generosity and family responsibility can be seen in his reaction to the tragic death of his brother, Max. Concerned for Max's young family, Ben took the initiative, and with his brothers borrowed $100,000 on their signature and future earnings to set up a trust fund to care for Max's widow and three children.[22]

His desire to be helpful involved him in a variety of activities. A man of devout religious faith, he became a stalwart of the Temple B'nai Israel, serving as president, chairing almost every committee, and serving as a member of the honorary Board of Trustees of the Temple. For many years he was the agency through whom funds were solicited for the Jewish-funded Hope project in California. Upon his death, he became one of the few to be buried from the temple itself.[23]

This character was apparent in his reaction to civic responsibility and his firm belief in America, a nation that represented honesty, truth and freedom to Ben May. Ben's abiding faith in America was unshakable. Though faced with few incidents of discrimination, one such incident could have shaken another man's faith, but not Ben's. During World War II, the government maintained pricing regulations under the Office of Price Administration. An inspector for the Office had checked the practices of May Brothers, and had decided to press charges against the firm for violation of price controls. Ben May knew his innocence, but when the case went to court, one of the prosecuting attorneys made some reference to the original May family name and why it had been changed in an attempt to defame Ben's character. Had America slipped? Ben said no. "We can't judge America by the actions of one man. America will be

fair. Thank God for America."[24] The result was a verdict of not guilty and a clean bill of health for the May Brothers' store. Ben May's faith had been justified.

This dedication caused Ben May to take an active role in civic affairs. A man who believed strongly in building the character of America's youth, he became one of the Oklahoma pioneers in the Boy Scout movement. Joining scouting in 1910, he had organized the first council of Bartlesville. Later on he served as a National Committeeman to the Boy Scouts and was chairman of the committee that established Camp Kickapoo. Ben continued his work with Boy Scouts by establishing and maintaining the Ben H. May Memorial Library, housed as part of the Bob Allen Street Memorial in Oklahoma City. In recognition of these achievements, he received the highest award bestowed by the Boy Scouts, the Silver Beaver Award.[25]

With interests not limited to scouting, Ben became involved in a number of charitable fund drives and served as a member of the Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis Club, and the Men's Dinner Club. As a strong civic leader, he purchased many industrial bonds to help bring industry into Oklahoma. Many of these bonds are still held as part of his estate. Among his many honors, one of the highest was awarded him by the State of Oklahoma itself. To recognize Ben as one of the state's leading pioneer merchants, his portrait is now displayed in the Oklahoma Historical Society Museum.[26]

This was what became of that boy who was born a Russian Jew on August 15, 1873. Ben May passed away on September 30, 1960, at the age of eighty-eight. His achievements, his generosity, and his vision carved the tributes of the many hundreds of people who had learned to love and

admire him through his long life. Among those qualities most appreciated by those who knew him were his deep faith and love for his adopted country.

Two weeks after his death, the Senator from Oklahoma, Robert S. Kerr, penned the following letter to Milton May.

> Often have I thought of you since the passing of your wonderful father and my fine friend. Ben May was not only an outstanding business, civic, and lay leader of Oklahoma, but also one of the most benevolent and greatest souls I have had the pleasure of knowing. He was always a cherished friend, and I share your sorrow in his passing.[27]

The May family has now lived in the United States for eighty-five years, during which time they have prospered and progressed from their humble and obscure debarkation upon Ellis Island to become one of the more prominent families in this state. Their story has been the classic story of the immigrant experience, according to which goodwill, diligence, thrift, family solidarity, and faith have conquered all obstacles and brought lasting success. To those who would question the future of this country, to those who would deny the reality of its promise, the May family today would simply echo old Ben's life-long credo, "Thank God for America".

ENDNOTES

[1]Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus", Collegiate Encyclopedia (New York, 1971), Vol. XVII, p. 248. This poem was suggested by Mr. Milton May, Oklahoma City, who offered his time in numerous interviews for this project. Mr. May has shown tremendous interest not only in this project, but for all historical endeavors as well. J. F. May and his son Mike, of Bartlesville, also gave of their time to provide information into the family background.

[2]U.S. Senate, 61st Congress, 3rd Session, Reports of the Immigration Commission (Washington, 1911), Vol. XX, p. 4.

[3]Interview with Milton May, Oklahoma City, March 28, 1974.

[4]Yehoshwa A. Gilboa, Black Years of Soviet Jewry (Boston, 1971), p. 24.

[5]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900 (Washington, 1902), Vol. I Population, p. 647.

[6]T.S. Adams and H. L. Sumner, Labor Problems (New York, 1905), pp. 113-138.

[7]C. B. Glasscock, Then Came Oil (New York, 1938), pp. 165-166.

[8]From the Original Incorporation Records of the Madansky Brothers Clothiers.

[9]Interview with Jake May, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, April 2, 1974.

[10]Mike May, "The May Family" (unpublished paper read at the Bartlesville Historical Society, March 27, 1974, Bartlesville, Oklahoma), p. 3.

[11]Muskogee and Northeastern Oklahoma (Chicago, 1922), Vol. III, pp. 310-311.

[12]The Daily Oklahoman (March 27, 1921), p. 24.

[13]Interview with Milton May, Oklahoma City, April 11, 1974.

[14]Interview with Milton May, Oklahoma City, April 12, 1974.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Interview with Milton May, Oklahoma City, March 28, 1974.

[18]Examiner Enterprise (October 24, 1943).

[19]Ibid., October 19, 1960.

[20]May, "The May Family", p. 4.

[21]Interview with Mike May, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, April 2, 1974.

[22]Interview with Milton May, Oklahoma City, April 12 , 1974.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Robert S. Kerr to Milton May, Oklahoma City, October 14, 1960.

CHAPTER III

JACOB KLAASSEN: A RUSSIAN MENNONITE IN OKLAHOMA

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a great exodus of European people migrated to other parts of the world in an effort to secure greater civil liberties and economic opportunities. One distinct group of European peoples to participate in this migration was the Russian Mennonites. This sect's spiritual convictions carved out a fascinating migratory path which took it to three continents in search of religious freedoms. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine the dramatic journey of one such Mennonite family who can claim the fertile valleys of West Prussia, the great steppes of Russia, the vast wastelands of Turkestan and the golden wheat fields of Oklahoma as successive parts of its heritage.

The Mennonites developed as a branch of the Anabaptist movement, rising out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century and taking their name from an early leader, Menno Simons. The Mennonites can trace their origin to the Swiss Roman Catholic priest, Ulrich Zwingli.[1] Though considered a radical, Zwingli often tempered his reforms in the face of opposition, causing a schism to develop within his group of followers. The dissidents felt the role of the priesthood to be unnecessary and believed that each individual should be led by the "Spirit of God". Those who had repented of sin and received Christ could become part of the church and repentance was followed by baptism. Their religious

creed was further based on the concept of church and state separation, the belief that love was the prime New Testament teaching in life, and that taking a human life through the military or civil authorities was against the teachings of Christ.[2]

During this same era, a similar sect led by two brothers, Obbe and Dirk Phillips was gaining support in the Netherlands. This sect called themselves "Obbenites", and a young reformist named Menno Simons soon became their recognized leader. It was through the efforts of Menno Simons that the Dutch Anabaptist groups united. The personal success of Simons led to these Anabaptists ultimately referring to themselves as Mennonites.[3]

The Mennonites placed absolute faith in the word of God and interpreted the scriptures literally, while denouncing any deviation from the scriptures as evil. Since the Bible was to be the sole guide and authority, there was to be no church hierarchy or priesthood, and each congregation was to establish its own canons of belief. Because of their resistance to state control and their non-conformity to established churches, the groups soon met with persecution, causing the withdrawal of the Mennonites into isolated communities.

The continued persecution faced by Mennonite groups in the Netherlands and Switzerland hastened the flight of many congregations into the neighboring German provinces and Poland. Some 10,000 had made their way into Germany and many found prosperity in West Prussia and along the Vistula Delta of East Prussia.[4] The Mennonite movement continued to expand, and by 1850 there were over 67,000 Mennonites. Not all of these congregations went east, as America became an early recipient of Mennonite immigrants. As early as 1659, Mennonites had settled in New York,

and a significant Mennonite settlement was located at Germantown, Pennsylvania by 1683. By the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, 5,000 had immigrated to North America, and by 1850 some 20,000 were residing within the United States.[5]

A number of the Mennonite congregations of West Prussia eventually migrated to the United States, but not before seeking new opportunities on the Russian steppe. By examining the experiences of a particular Mennonite family and its background, one may be able to gain a better understanding of the migratory path taken by the German Mennonites. One such man and his family that is representative of Mennonite migration is the Jacob Klaassen family, both his ancestry and progeny. This chapter deals with that particular family and their ultimate journey to a place called Oklahoma Territory.

The ancestry of Jacob Klaassen can be traced back to Cornelius Andres. Born of Lutheran parents in September, 1680, Cornelius was raised and confirmed in that faith. But, at the age of twenty-five, he went to Amsterdam seeking instruction in the Mennonite faith and was baptized in 1706. After marrying, he settled on an estate at Tiegerweide, West Prussia and not only became a prosperous farmer but an integral part of the Tiegenhagen Mennonite Church, serving as elder of the Grosswerderische Gemeinde, which included all Mennonite churches in the area.[6] Cornelius served these Mennonite congregations for twenty-two years. Two Mennonite characteristics become apparent by looking at the life of this man and his offspring: the success which most achieved at farming and the total devotion given to their God.

The ninth child of this typically large Mennonite family was Anna Andres, who married David Klaassen. The story of this courtship is one

worth telling. It seems that young David Klaassen had inherited very little from his father and was working as a farm laborer on an estate in West Prussia. One day while walking past a mill operated by a water wheel, he noticed a girl who had fallen into the canal and was being drawn toward the wheel. Thinking only of her safety, he jumped into the canal and saved the young lady's life. As an expression of gratitude, she was given to him in marriage along with a sizeable dowry. This enabled David to purchase an estate of one Hufe (forty-eight acres); he later added to his property holdings by purchasing three other estates of greater importance. When he died in 1780, he left a considerable inheritance for his children.[7]

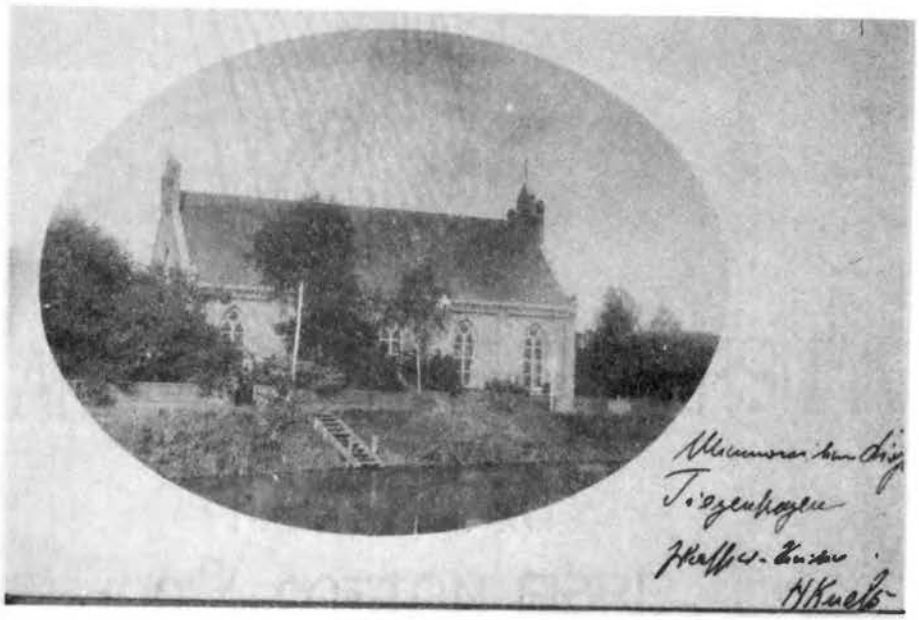

Figure 10. The Tiegenhagen Church, Germany, where Cornelius Andres worshipped in the eighteenth century.

It was Dirk Klaassen, the youngest child of David Klaassen, who would become the beneficiary of this estate. The reason for the youngest to become the recipient of so much wealth is unknown, for it was usually the elder member who enjoyed the inheritance. In any case, Dirk was from the beginning a well-to-do young man, and his prosperity continued while living in West Prussia. He became very successful in raising horses and had a substantial annual income of 10,000 Gulden (about four thousand dollars) from the sale of horses.

The year 1807 was a pivotal one for Dirk Klaassen, and perhaps other Mennonite families, as Prussia was embroiled in war, considered an unnecessary evil in the eyes of the Mennonites. Though Dirk was able to maintain his estate by surrendering a few hundred Gulden and billeting the plundering enemy soldiers, many of his horses were either stolen or died under the strain of hauling provisions or war material.[8] A man of dignity, this experience no doubt made an impression upon the conscience of Dirk and many of his neighbors.

The fourth son of Dirk Klaassen was Jacob Klaassen of Tiegenhagen, who, after attending school, went to manage the estate of his maternal grandmother Anna Suckow. After eleven years in this activity, Jacob married Helena Hamm in 1818. Within two years he had purchased an estate of two Hufen (96 acres) at a price of some 34,000 Gulden ($13,500). This financial burden became so great that the thought of emigration to Russia was considered. But at this time it was decided to sell the large estate and purchase one half its size, and with this he received enough cash to pay his most pressing debts. Though this allowed their financial conditions to improve, within a few years the idea of emigration would again face the Jacob Klaassen family.[9]

Figure 11. The elder Jacob Klaassen and his wife, Helena nee Hamm.

The Mennonite congregations had prospered moderately in the fertile provinces of both West and East Prussia. But political upheaval which characterized the decade of the 1840s and which culminated in the Revolutions of 1848, would give this religious minority ample reasons for emigration. After 1848, the prospects for living according to one's conscience became dim, especially regarding military service. The King of Prussia not only imposed universal military conscription but also heavy taxes and a restriction upon the total land area that could be acquired by the Mennonites.[10] This not only violated the Mennonites' religious convictions, but the heavy taxes and land shortage caused

them acute economic problems.

Emigration had actually begun at an earlier date because of the generous concessions made by Catherine II concerning colonization of the Volga frontier. In 1876 she had sent a personal invitation to the Mennonites of the lower Vistula Delta to encourage immigration. A special committee, headed by Johann Bartch and Jacob Hoeppner, was sent out to spy the land, and their favorable reports opened the migratory trail.[11] Though migration passes were hard to obtain from the Danzig government, within two years more than two hundred families had started the journey. The first settlement at Chortitza, located near Alexandrovsk on the Dnieper River, was begun in July, 1789.[12] Continued immigration prompted the addition of three other major settlements, with colonies established at Molotschna, Samara, and the Trakt. Molotschna lay in the Crimean area not far from Chortitza, while the Samara and Trakt colonies were on the Volga frontier near the city of Saratov. By 1840 there were 750 families at the Molotschna settlement, and by 1870 there were about 45,000 Mennonites in Russia.[13]

The large number of Mennonite brethren who chose immigration to Russia influenced Jacob's decision to move to the Trakt settlement in 1854. One son, Martin, had already immigrated the previous year. Jacob sold his estate for 8,000 Thaler and with his second son, Dietrick, his wife, and Cornelius and Abraham Froese, began the journey. After ten weeks of travel via Grodna, Vilna, Kiev, and Saratov, the wagons finally arrived at their destination. The Klaassens took temporary lodging with the Abraham Jantzen family until the spring of 1856, when they moved to the village of Koeppental, in the Trakt.[14]

Jacob's sixth son, Martin, had been one of the earlier colonists

of the Trakt, at first working as a surveyor and carpenter in the village of Hans-Au. In 1855, he was offered the position of teacher in the village, and five years later he moved to Koeppental, where he taught for twenty years.[15] Though the first years of pioneer life meant facing problems and making adjustments, the Mennonites prospered in their new-found homeland.

Living in comparative freedom, the Mennonites grouped themselves into small, communal-type farm villages consisting of from twenty to thirty families. From the center of the village, arable land stretched out in every direction. Not only did the families all share equally in the good and inferior land, but the village maintained common pastures where the cattle and sheep were kept. Leading occupations were stock raising, sheep breeding, dairying, and general farming. The silk industry took on some importance, and later the introduction of new prolific strains of wheat hastened the development of a flourishing milling industry and the rise of a bustling trading center at Berdiansk on the Black Sea. Grain was often stored in the attic of the house until market time, but this was no real inconvenience since the home, barn, stable, and shops were usually housed under one roof.[16] The Mennonites who had been invited to Russia as master farmers had proven themselves to be just that.

Life in the village of Koeppental must have been pleasant for the Martin Klaassen family. Though his salary was only one hundred and twenty rubles a year, he also received fuel, feed for two cows and two hogs, and wheat for flour. This provided a modest living for the family and allowed Martin to devote his interests to the Bible, to his writing, and to his art. While at Koeppental, Martin wrote a book entitled

Geschichte der Wehrlosen Taufgesinnten Gemeinden, a history of the non-resistant Anabaptist churches from the time of the apostles to his own day. Later this was published by a printer in Danzig. Martin was also an excellent artist, and one of his paintings found its way into the reception chamber of the Tsar's Winter Palace at St. Petersburg. This painting dealt with a typically Mennonite theme, depicting a large herd of cattle and horses near a barn flanked by rolling wheat fields.[17]

Figure 12. Martin Klaassen, his wife Marie, and their children, Marie, Jacob and Michael.

It was at Koeppental that Jacob Klaassen was born on April 15, 1867. His memories of the village of Koeppental and of the school house where his father taught were fond ones.

> Koeppental was a beautiful village. It lay in a valley through which flowed a small brook. The farmyards were arranged on both sides of the brook, a total of twenty-five in all. On both sides of the brook were high trees;...one bridge, one footbridge, and two fords enabled us to get from one side to the other....Each farm had gardens and a wood lot attached to it....Especially clear in my memory is the vision of the quiet summer evenings when the village shepherd would drive the cattle into the village, every animal finding its own gate. A more beautiful picture of peaceful village life there never was.[18]

These times were highlighted by the days when Jacob could help his Uncle Hamm with the plowing and seeding of the steppe land. Using a three-shared plow pulled by four horses upon which a seeding machine was fastened, Jacob envisioned himself as an important, prosperous farmer much like his uncle. But this serene and simple life was not to last, for during the decade of the 1870s, changes in tsarist policy plus certain economic dislocation prompted a decision to emigrate.

The question of where to emigrate was one which received considerable discussion. North America was looked at by some "as a country, interesting for the adventurer, an asylum for convicts. But for a non-resistent people it would be impossible to establish homes amid such surroundings." But in the end North America would become the choice of virtually all who decided to emigrate. After considering the possibilities of South America, Africa, and Siberia, agents were sent to look for land in America. Though selling their Russian land was a problem, and securing passports often required large bribes to corrupt government officials, within a decade some 26,000 Mennonites had immigrated and settled on the prairies of Kansas, Dakota, Nebraska and Manitoba.[19]

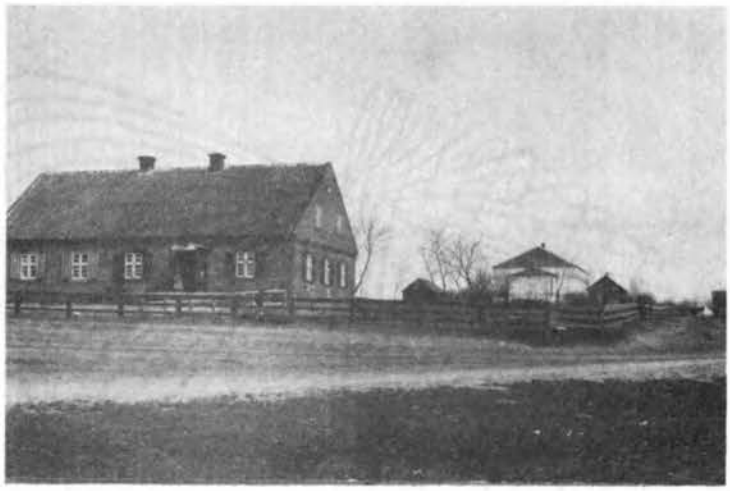

Figure 13. The Koeppental schoolhouse where Martin Klaassen taught for twenty years.

Figure 14. The Mennonite Church in the Russian village of Koeppental.

This great migration was accomplished because of certain preparations made by Mennonite brethren already established in the United States and Canada. Canadian authorities were particularly anxious to receive the Mennonites, and many of the Chortitza colony decided upon Manitoba. To encourage them, the Canadian government offered loans and homesteads to the Mennonites plus full religious rights, exclusive control of schools, and military exemption. Twenty-six townships in Manitoba Province were granted exclusively to the immigrants from Russia. By 1879, some 8,000 had settled in Manitoba.[20]

Kansas and Nebraska were also interested in attracting these prosperous farmers, and a large number immigrated to these prairie states from the Molotschna colony. In 1873, the Western District Mennonite Conference of Kansas set up a committee to aid the Molotschna immigrants and collected $100,000. In addition, many individual loans were also granted the new arrivals. Not only did they receive help from their fellow Mennonite brethren, but the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Company actively worked to encourage Russian Mennonites to settle on its lands. The Railroad offered such incentives as cheap land, reduced freight rates, and immigration barracks for temporary housing to encourage the would-be Kansas farmer.[21] The result was that one-half of those Mennonites who settled in Kansas purchased railroad lands.

Though a great number of Mennonites emigrated to America, the families of the Trakt were optimistically hoping for another answer. A number of deputations were sent to St. Petersburg to make inquiries as to possible places within the Russian Empire where they might live according to their faith. On one such trip, Martin Klaassen and other delegates met with Governor General von Kaufmann of Tashkent in Turke-

stan, who invited the Mennonites to come there. The area of Turkestan had been conquered by Russia in 1865, and a governor-general established over the province.

This prompted the colonists to send Jacob Hamm and Peter Wiebe to Tashkent to examine the living conditions, and when these men returned with favorable reports, it was decided to emigrate. This journey to Asia was also encouraged by Klaas Epp, Jr., whose father had been the organizer and leader of the expedition which established the Trakt settlement, and founder of Hans-Au, the oldest colony in the Volga area. Young Epp had been influenced by the writings of the German millenialist, Jung-Stilling, and Epp prophesied that the Second Coming of Christ would be south of Samarkand, Turkestan, on March 8, 1889.[22] Some one hundred families were persuaded to make the trip. The Martin Klaassen family was part of that expedition. The departure times were staggered over several months, and five different wagon trains of approximately twenty families each made the journey. The diary and the memories of young Jacob Klaassen, a lad of thirteen, provide an excellent description of this arduous adventure.

Emigration was a familiar experience for many, since a number had come from West Prussia by wagon just twenty-six years earlier. On August 11, 1880, the Koeppental party began their journey amid the usual farewell of family and friends, and the first few days were spent stopping at other Mennonite villages, seeing relatives for the last time, and assembling the final emigration party. Their wagon train was the second to leave the Trakt area, as the initial group had left four weeks earlier. When the immigration party was assembled, it included twelve families and twenty-nine wagons led by Jacob's uncle, Heinrich Jantzen.[23]

The early days of the trip were enjoyable ones, marked by picturesque encampments with fires burning brightly and samovars steaming, people visiting, women cooking, and naturally the offering of praises to God in sermon and song. The communal morning worship service highlighted the beginning of each day. After leaving the Trakt behind, the group journeyed toward Uralsk in the land of the Ural Cossacks, and to the first major city on their route, Orenburg. Orenburg was a commercial city, the gateway to Siberia and Central Asia.[24] Here the group made a lengthy stop-over, making necessary repairs and purchasing supplies for the arduous journey which confronted them.

Conditions became somewhat more severe after leaving Orenburg, and the use of a camel caravan became more appropriate. Some six weeks after the journey began they arrived at Karabutak, in the land of the Kirgheez. The Mennonites were fascinated with the Kirgheez and their customs. They wore long, colorful garments, topped by a turban. The family was patriarchal in nature, with the man possessing many wives. Rice, the main staple in their diet, was eaten with their fingers. Though their customs seemed peculiar to the Mennonites, the nomadic Kirgheez were very useful as guides, as they knew where to find forage and water in the desert.

Upon entering Turkestan territory the party was greeted by desert and barren sand dunes. The worst part of the trip lay ahead through the Kyzyl Kum Desert, a wasteland that stretched out some two hundred and fifty miles without permanent habitation. But proper preparations had been made, and by "God's grace" they encountered no great problems. They soon arrived at the town of Kasalinsk, which was near the Syr Darya River. The buildings, streets, shops, even roofs were made from mud,

yet everything was clean in this bustling little town. The town seemed to possess a cosmopolitan atmosphere, with a mingling of races that represented Russians, Kirgheez, Sarts, Tartars, Bukharians, Jews, and now, Russian Mennonites.[25]

The promises of Governor-General von Kaufmann and the hospitality of the Turkestanis were soon made apparent. The governor had sent out orders not to hinder the Mennonites who wished to spend the winter at Kasalinsk, but they chose to complete their journey to Kaplan Bek. The rest of the journey went smoothly, and the party found the Tashkent government to be very accomodating. Thus, on November 24, 1880, after fifteen weeks of travel, the immigrants finally arrived at Kaplan Bek, some twenty miles from Tashkent. This was to be their temporary winter home.

The dwellings into which the families moved were old renovated horsestalls. Everything was made of mud, the building material that the Mennonites had become so familiar with during their trek. These renovated stalls provided very close quarters, and many things were done together. For example, every Sunday the evening meal was held in common and called the "love feast".

Naturally, the task at hand was to find a permanent settlement, and several delegations were sent to Governor von Kaufmann in hopes of finding suitable land. The delegation was informed that a tract not far from Tashkent had been set aside for their use. Upon inspection, the Mennonites found the ground to be stony and not adaptable to farming. Kaufmann, therefore, offered an alternative: a tract of land near Aulie Ata, some one hundred and fifty miles away near the Siberian border.

While still quartered at Kaplan Bek, a serious typhoid epidemic

struck the immigrants. Perhaps fifteen to twenty percent of the Mennonite immigrants died in this epidemic, including the nineteen-year-old daughter of Martin Klaassen. This was not the only serious blow to befall the group, for on March 1, 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated.[26] The Tsar had been friendly to the Russian Mennonites. He had personally attempted to dissuade them from their mass exodus to America and had granted them permission to perform forestry service in lieu of military service. He had also shown understanding to those Mennonites in Turkestan, to whom he had given permission to migrate for social and religious reasons. Alexander III, the second son of the assassinated Tsar, ascended the throne and soon followed with a more conservative policy toward minority elements within the Empire. Their troubles were again compounded when the benevolent Governor von Kaufmann suffered a stroke and died in May, 1881. Within six months the Mennonites had witnessed the death of two of their most powerful protectors and had suffered through a serious typhoid epidemic which had cruelly snuffed out the lives of at least thirty of their number.[27]

General Vladimir Kolpokowsky became von Kaufmann's successor, and the Mennonites soon found that he was not sympathetic to their cause. This resulted in a factional split. Many were disillusioned and felt that the Tashkent area would not provide a stable future. Thus, the Klaas Epp faction, of which the Martin Klaassen family was a member, left Kaplan Bek and the lands of the Tsar for Bukhara, and the land of the Khan. Bukhara had been invaded by the Russians in 1868, and though it had been reduced to a vassal status and undertook to protect Russian trade, the little khanate still maintained some degree of autonomy.

The journey was begun with uncertainty as to what experiences faced

them in the land of the Bukharans. Rumors reported that the institution of slavery was prevalent in Bukhara and that uncivilized nomads roamed the land plundering and robbing unfortunate victims. Leaving Tashkent in the hot, dry summer of 1881, their journey was marked by several tragic occurrences, including death and sickness. After crossing the inhospitable "Hunger Steppe", they made their way to Samarkand, where they were housed in a former prison that had recently been vacated and remodeled. Pressing on, the group crossed the Bukharan border into the khanate on September 1. On the first morning in Bukharan territory, the wagon party was met by a number of Bukharan officials whose purpose was to gather information on the group. The following day, seven officials armed with swords appeared and informed the group that no land was available in Bukhara and they were unwelcome guests. To be sure of their exit, the weary Mennonites were escorted by the armed swordsmen to the small Sart village of Serabulak.

The next morning was spent visiting Russian officials in an attempt to secure a neutral tract of land along the border between Bukhara and Russian Turkestan in a kind of "no man's land". An agreement was reached, and the colonists anxiously anticipated settling in their new home. The men carefully laid out a village site and began the construction of sod houses on an area they named Ebenezer.[28] While construction was in progress the group was again beset by extreme hardships. A sickness swept the village, and was responsible for the death of a number of the group. Included among the dead was the most honorable and respected Martin Klaassen, who died on November 24, 1881. As Martin lay dying he called his fourteen-year-old son, Jacob, to his bed and admonished him to be courageous and continue the unfinished journey.

That same day, Bukharan officials arrived, announcing that the agreement signed between the Russian officials and the Mennonite group was not recognized in Bukhara. With this, they shut off the water supply and ordered the inhabitants of Ebenezer to leave immediately, not even allowing time for the burial of the dead. The group found refuge for the winter back in the village of Serabulak. The Klaassen family, now without a patriarchal head, lived in a donkey stall through those winter months.[29]

While in Serabulak, orders came that one of the young men would be inducted into the Russian military. This posed a threat to the entire faction located at Serabulak and heightened the tensions developing over religious convictions within the group. Many were still convinced that God had pointed them toward Bukhara and that His commands superceded the orders of Russian and Bukharan officials. Thus, new arrangements were worked out with the Khan of Khiva, and this small band of devoted followers sought Christ in yet another land. Khiva had been conquered by the Russians in 1873, and though all the land was subject to the tsar, it was ruled by the Khan. On August 30, 1882, the whole emigrant community departed for Khiva where the promised land along the Amu Darya River awaited. The description of a land not yet seen sounded like paradise--"fertile land, religious freedom, immunity from conscription, and a place of refuge to wait for Christ".[30]

More than sixty families, about one hundred and fifty people, loaded their wagons and began this trip. The greatest obstacle to overcome was the harsh Kara Kul Desert, a three-day crossing. The deep sand dunes of the desert prohibited the passage of the wagons, and so these were dismantled and loaded upon camels, described by Jacob Klaassen as "the

ships of the desert". After coming through the desert, they arrived in the small town of Ildyik on the Amu Darya River. The remainder of the trip would be made down this river. Finally, they arrived at their destination and found that it was not paradise after all. They found themselves in a low-lying, insect-infested, marshy area surrounded by brush and tall reeds. Jacob Klaassen describes it best:

> Here we sat with our things, under an open sky in a robber-infested region far away from any culturally-advanced settlement, many hundred wersts from any fellow believers, and generally removed from all civilization.[31]

Completely engulfed by an alien surrounding, it was only their faith in God which could possibly comfort them.

A village site was laid out and named Lausan. Earthen huts were built and many of the group settled on an elevated plain nearby. Soon a church was erected, gardens planted, and fields prepared. The industrious Mennonites opened some old irrigation-canals and were soon watering fields and gardens. It seemed as though this beleaguered group would be able to adjust to their new environment, but they soon experienced a series of nightly raids by bands of nomadic Turkmen which threatened their existence. Since the Mennonites offered no resistance to the Turkmen, robberies continued to increase until some fifty horses and thirty cattle had been stolen. The damage did not stop with the loss of livestock, as homes were entered and vandalized, and these unchecked robberies eventually led to the brutal stabbing death of Heinrich Abrahms. Many of the young Mennonite men felt that it would be best to fight in self-defense, but the elders decided to hire a couple of Ural Cossacks as watchmen instead. The banditry of the Turkmen quickly ceased after this move. Many of the faithful questioned the

employment of these two Cossack guards as a violation of their religious convictions. As Jacob Klaassen writes, "it soon became clear to our fathers that not only was our existence in question,...but a basic principle of our faith, non-violence. Therefore, we could not stay here".[32]

Consequently, the idea of emigrating to America was given a great deal of thought. After exchanging letters concerning conditions in America and asking for material assistance, about one-third of the Khivan group left for America. Jacob Klaassen was part of that migration. The remaining families, approximately forty, accepted an invitation from the Khan to establish a colony at Ak Metchet, near the capital city of Khiva.[33]

On April 17, 1884, the Khivan group departed for a new promised land, America. After four years of living an almost nomadic existence and suffering under the harshest of circumstances, they returned once again to Orenburg. Journeying along the rugged cliffs of the Ust-Urt mountain range and beside the sandy shores of the Aral Sea, across desert wastelands, often times without adequate water and supplies, and across the steppes, the Mennonite families plodded. After eight weeks of travel the group reached Orenburg. Here the emigrants encountered some difficulty in acquiring passports because of the recent death of the governor and remained in the Russian city for some two months. Jacob Klaassen secured work at the railroad station during this interim period.

Finally passports were secured and the group left Orenburg. The emigrants travelled by train to Bremen, Germany. Here they boarded the large passenger ship, the Ems, which took them to New York. Several

Mennonite representatives from the plains states of Nebraska and Kansas warmly greeted the group to their new country and plans were made for the trip west. Widow Marie Klaassen and her children decided to follow eight other families to Beatrice, Nebraska.[34] The journey had, for the time being, ended.

Arriving in Nebraska, Marie Klaassen and her children were cordially welcomed into the home of the Louis Zimmerman family. The Klaassen family was very poor, and Jacob, now eighteen, felt it his responsibility to work and provide his mother with the necessities of food and clothing. Jacob soon found work on a farm owned by Wilhelm Fast. The summer harvest was already completed, and Jacob found his job to be milking the cattle and feeding the pigs. Since the Fast farm was some distance, Jacob also boarded with his new employer. The house was small and very drafty, and Jacob's sleeping quarters were open to the elements. On many occasions Jacob awoke covered with snow. The chances of becoming a big farmer appeared bleak. Jacob spent two years working for Mr. Fast, receiving but seven dollars a month for his efforts.[35]

After working as a laborer on several other farms, Jacob joined his older brother, Michael, in renting an eighty-acre farm from the minister, H. Zimmerman. The industrious Jacob rented additional land from a neighbor, and purchased, on credit, two horses, harnesses, a wagon, and a hand plow.[36] It was at this time that Michael's health deteriorated, forcing him to move to town, and Jacob took over sole responsibility for the rented farmland. But young Jacob yearned for land which he might call his own. Unfortunately, he did not have the means to buy a place in Nebraska, and so the dream of being a big farmer and landowner seemed remote. New hope soon came with the news

of land openings in Oklahoma Territory.

Thus, in 1894, this opportunity prompted Jacob and Michael Klaassen to leave Nebraska and seek a new home in Oklahoma. After surveying several possibilities in Washita County, the two brothers took up homesteads near the Shelly Mission Station. After paying the ten dollar fee for registration and making the necessary arrangements for taking possession of the land, the two became landowners. The two brothers then returned to Nebraska to pack their belongings and finish harvesting the spring crop. They were met by their Nebraska neighbors who warned them of the harshness of pioneer life and the severe hardships each would face, all in an effort to frighten the two Klaassen brothers. But this did not halt their preparations. After final threshing, they packed their belongings, hired a railroad car, loaded possessions, horses and cows, closed all remaining business deals, and left for the banks of the Washita River on August 23, 1894.[37]

The railroad ran as far as Minco, some seventy miles from their homestead. This is where pioneer life would begin. After a hard two-day journey, they arrived at their destination. The land was there, but that was all. It meant starting from scratch in a land not yet settled. As Jacob Klaassen describes it, "there was work and more work". Work was begun by building a barn of sod. The description provided by Jacob Klaassen deserves attention:

> With the breaking plow I plowed a furrow where there was a thick heavy sod, cut the sod in pieces with a spade, hauled them to the construction site and piled up the walls. For the roof I laid a heavy log across the middle, across that the beams, on the beams boards spread out thinly, on the boards hay, and earth on top of everything.... The walls were quite rough on the inside; the hay hung through the roof between the boards, and when it rained, it rained as hard inside as it did outside. We lived nearly a whole year in that barn.[38]

Problems also confronted Jacob from many other sources. Alkaline water meant the burden of hauling water from the neighbors or from the river. Land had to be plowed and planted. The cold winds of winter, compounded by a lack of wood, made it necessary to use cowchips and grass as fuel.[39] Supplies posed still more problems, since most everything was purchased in Minco or El Reno. This meant crossing the South Canadian River, where one might be met by swollen waters or deadly quicksand. It was not until 1898 that the Rock Island Railroad would reach nearby Weatherford.[40] If these problems were not enough for these hardy pioneers, the first few years were marked by a severe drought. This prompted many to return to Kansas and Nebraska, but the Klaassen brothers were determined to stay, and the follwing harvests rewarded their perserverance. The success of these first Mennonite settlers prompted many others to homestead in the Weatherford area.

In the early months of 1895, Jacob sent his brother, Michael, to woo Katie Toews of Newton, Kansas, for him. This seems like a somewhat antiquated method of securing a bride, but it worked. By letter, Jacob came to an agreement with Katie and her parents, and on February 22, the couple became engaged. After a whirlwind courtship of three weeks, the couple was married on March 15, 1895.[41] The days which followed the wedding were filled with work, as Jacob prepared to take his wife back to Oklahoma. Though Jacob had attempted to prepare his bride for the hardships that awaited a pioneer woman, the nearer home they came the greater Jacob's apprehension grew about possible disappointments. Much of this was alleviated by the warm reception they received upon returning to Washita County.

The following years would be good ones for Jacob Klaassen and his

new bride. Jacob worked long hours, but was rewarded for his efforts. Each spring Jacob invested more into his farm, buying cattle, chickens, pigs, planting kaffir corn and wheat, and fencing pasturelands. This enabled him to build a better and larger house of sod. The inside walls were plastered with clay which absorbed moisture more efficiently, and Jacob could afford the luxury of boards for a ceiling. This was far more satisfactory than the previous hay and mud mixture. The floor, of course, was still "dear old mother earth".

Continued migration of Mennonites into the community had built up a stable congregation, and naturally the church became the center of all social and religious activity. The church had been established on August 24, 1894, when fifteen families from the Alexanderwohl and Hoffnungsau communities of central Kansas organized the Bergthal congregation.[42] Because of problems crossing the Washita River, in 1896, the church agreed to separate into two bodies. The east retained the Bergthal name, while the west became known as the Sichar Mennonite Church. Michael Klaassen became pastor of the new Sichar congregation. Some eight families from the Trakt settlement of Russia were part of this congregation. The importance of the church led to the immediate construction of a new building, 28 feet by 40 feet, on land donated by Jacob Jantzen.[43]

Within two years, mistrust and intrigue caused a schism which threatened the unity of the congregation. In April, 1899, a complete break occurred, and for several months the congregation headed by Michael Klaassen held worship services in a school located south of the church. The committee for Congregational Concerns of the Western District Mennonite Conference was contacted to work out a possible re-

conciliation, but it was finally agreed that total separation was in the best interest of the group, and the Klaassen faction secured a loan of $325 and purchased the Sichar church. The faction led by Ohm Pankratz then moved to a new location.[44] This was September 13, 1899. The very next day twenty families gathered and organized the Herold Mennonite Church, and Michael Klaassen was elected as their minister. The church had been named after the post office in Bessie, which had originally been called Herold. The charter membership included some forty-six members, comprising immigrants from Russia, Poland, and West Prussia.[45] Under Michael Klaassen's leadership, the Herold Church became one of the more prominent General Conference churches in Oklahoma.

In the meantime, farm life had changed considerably for Jacob Klaassen. The Mennonites had introduced a prolific strain of wheat, known as Turkey Red, which was especially hardy and productive in the warm prairie spring. The crop of 1903 was a particularly good one, and more than 800 bushels of wheat were harvested by Jacob Klaassen. This enabled the construction of new buildings on the Klaassen farm, including the construction of a three room frame house.[46] The most noticeable change, however, was the addition of five sons born to Jacob and Katie Klaassen.

The turn of the century found other changes besides those on the Jacob Klaassen farm. Michael had begun a German school in his house and had been elected elder of the congregation. This was followed by the election of Jacob Klaassen to the ministry, and in January, 1904, he was ordained by his brother Michael and elected minister of the Herold congregation. Both the school, under Michael's guidance, and the church, under Jacob's care, prospered. The school, which had been

Figure 15. The first home of the Klaassen family purchased in 1889 at Plymouth, Nebraska.

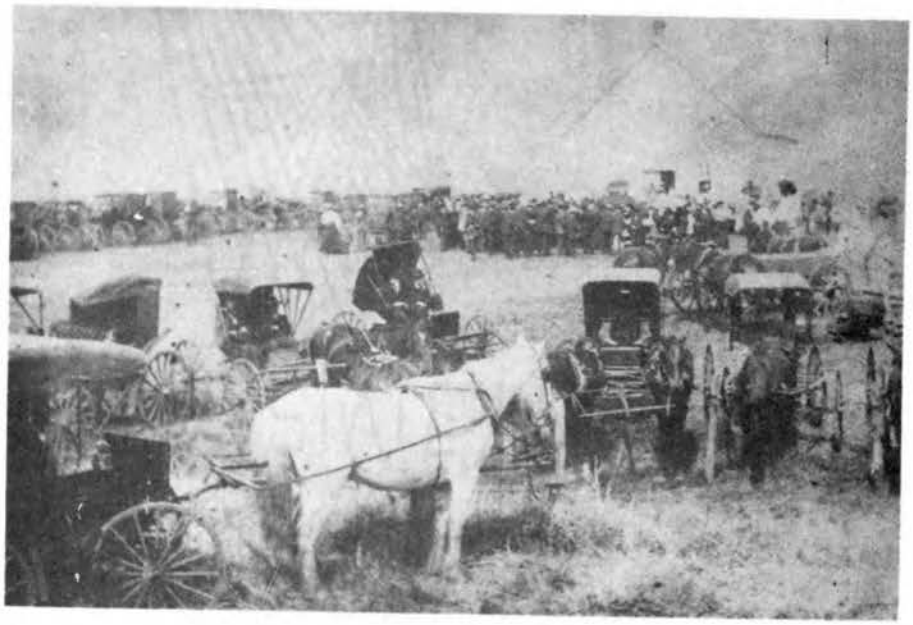

Figure 16. A Sunday scene at the Herold Mennonite Church in 1907.

opened in 1901 with five pupils, had thirty-five by 1905.[47] Having outgrown the house, a new schoolhouse was erected in Michael Klaassen's yard. At the same time, Jacob was becoming more actively involved in the General Conference activity of the church. Though not a Bible scholar, Jacob proved a dedicated disciple of his Lord.

The Enabling Act of 1906 merged Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory, and the two became the new state Oklahoma when it was admitted to the Union on November 16, 1907.[48] Jacob Klaassen had now lived in Oklahoma thirteen years, and though it had taken a great deal of hard work, the land had provided him many blessings. The Mennonites, as a people, had prospered in Oklahoma. By 1907, there were thirty-seven Mennonite congregations in Oklahoma, with a membership that approached 2,000. The Herold Church, itself, had grown from the initial forty-six charter members to include a congregation of 125.[49]

Joy and good fortune do not always last forever, and in the years between statehood and the outbreak of World War I, Jacob Klaassen would suffer several tragic losses. The first great loss occurred in 1908, when the only daughter of Jacob and Katie died after just twelve days of life. This experience, coupled with the harsh work of pioneer life, was especially hard on the mother. Only twenty-three days after the death of his daughter, Jacob's young wife succumbed to an internal infection. Now Jacob was left alone, the father of six boys. Jacob felt extreme depression after these two tragic incidents. "Only he who has experienced it knows how life rushes in upon the poor shattered and wounded heart at such times."[50] It was simply Jacob's unshakable faith in God which pulled him through. He now became both mother and father to the six boys left behind. Cleaning, cooking, sewing, and field work

all became part of his daily chores. The following year Jacob fell victim to encephalitis, and was extremely ill for months. It was only his unshakable faith in God and his undying loyalty to his sons that gave him the necessary strength to conquer this illness. Further tragedy occurred in the winter of 1910, when Jacob's son Herman fell under a wagon loaded with wheat, driven by his father and was instantly killed. The grief felt by Jacob was indescribable. It was the sincere help of friends that made the difference during this time.

Tragedy had befallen Jacob Klaassen on many occasions, but economic prosperity continued, and he made several additions to his holdings. He purchased eighty acres of land from the Indians in 1912. New barns were built for the larger crop production. A productive orchard had been planted, and the family had been extremely fortunate in raising horses. By the outbreak of World War I, Jacob Klaassen had become a man of considerable means. Continued growth and prosperity of the Mennonite congregation led to the establishment of a German secondary school in Gotebo and a Bible School in Meno. All five of Jacob's sons would attend one or the other of these schools. In 1915, while Jacob Klaassen was still minister of the Herold Church, this economic success led the congregation to construct a new church building at a cost of $4,000, and the first musical instruments used by the church were purchased at this time.[51] The Herold congregation of 1974 is still holding services in this building.

American entry into the first World War greatly changed the undisturbed life that the Russian Mennonites had enjoyed. In October, 1917, the first young men were drafted and sent to Camp Travis in Texas for basic training.[52] This included Michael Klaassen's only son, John,

and two other members of the Herold congregation. After so many years of peace, this soon became a confusing issue for the church leaders. Thoughts ran in two directions: one group felt that they should remain loyal to their country by supporting the war, while another group believed that faithfulness to the belief of non-resistance was more important. A deputation on this matter was sent to Washington, but this accomplished very little. In 1918, the question became very personal for Jacob Klaassen when his oldest son was drafted. Having four other sons that would soon be of draftable age, Jacob was faced with a decision that had confronted Mennonite families before. Thus, with "anxious and heavy hearts" a decision was reached to immigrate to Canada in obedience to religious convictions. Twenty-four years of pioneer life in Oklahoma had reached an end. After selling his property for $15,000 and resigning as minister of the Herold Church, Jacob began the trek to Canada.

Certain other reasons probably helped prompt the final decision. Despite the economic importance of the Mennonite to Washita County, the fervent patriotism of the people caused a number of problems for foreign-born groups. The Christian College in Cordell was closed during the war because a number of its former graduates had applied for conscientious objector status. Churches were forbidden to conduct services in German, and the suppression of other civil liberties was common in the Cordell area.[53] Perhaps one of the greatest personal tragedies to the Klaassen family involved the death of John Klaassen, Michael's only son. John had refused to serve in the military and had been sentenced to twenty-five years at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, in the spring of 1918. While in prison, John contracted a viral infection and died. Though there was some evidence of abuse and neglect, this was never proven.

This was a particularly severe blow to his father. The body was sent home dressed in an army uniform, but before his burial, the father removed it.[54] This made Michael Klaassen extremely unpopular in Washita County. A people whose only principle was that of love had beome a target of hatred. The "winds of war" play strange games with the minds of men.

Thus, on August 16, 1918, Jacob and Michael Klaassen took their leave from the Herold congregation after thirty-three years of combined service. It had been their leadership that had made the Herold Church into a stable congregation which still exists today. During the final farewell, Jacob could not contain the tears and heartfelt emotion that dwelled within.

> Had I not lived the most beautiful part of my life on this little piece of ground? I had lived there with my dear wife, and with my growing children. I had worked, prayed, and fought there,...had many glad and joyous hours there, and had also struggled through the deepest sorrow....[55]

Jacob later confessed that "in spite of all the good that I have received, I have never felt at home in Canada".[56] After living in Russia, Asia, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and finally Canada, it was the twenty-four years of life spent in western Oklahoma which represented home, and there could be no replacement.

Upon arriving in Canada, Jacob divided his time between farmlife and the church. He quickly became involved in the church, preaching the first Sunday after his arrival. He soon found a suitable farm, purchasing land some five miles east of Laird, Saskatchewan. The buildings were new and the land area covered an entire section. The whole thing cost $24,000. This would become the final home of Jacob Klaassen. That summer Jacob was elected minister of the Eigenheim Church, where

Figure 17. An aerial photo of the Henry Jantzen farm. The Herold Mennonite Church is in the background.

Figure 18. A photo of Jacob Klaassen (left) and Jacob Jantzen (right) taken in 1939.

he would serve for twenty-four years until his resignation in 1944.[57]

As a result of good management, the farm was very productive and the dreams of a small boy to become a big farmer had become a reality. After the marriage of all his five sons, Jacob was in no position to continue farming, and he thus divided his farm among his sons. He lived in retirement four years until his death. On October 7, 1948, he passed away in the Rosthern Hospital at the age of 81.[58]

Jacob Klaassen returned to Oklahoma on only one occasion during the winter months of 1925-26. The experience of seeing the old home was almost overwhelming, the memories unforgettable. Jacob Klaassen had given the best years of his life to settling these western Oklahoma farmlands, and he thanked God for the opportunities that had been given him. Most Mennonites that were part of this early homesteading experience felt much like Jacob. They had contributed the best years of their life to the establishment of western Oklahoma. They had struggled, then prospered to become both an economic and spiritual influence upon the community. The role of Mennonite immigrants like Jacob and Michael Klaassen represents another saga in the rich heritage that characterizes the American experience.

ENDNOTES

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[3]Ibid., p. 11.

[4]Douglas Hale, "From Central Asia to America," Mennonite Life, Vol. 25, Number 3 (July, 1970), p. 133.

[5]John C. Wenger, Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine (Scottdale, Penn., 1940), p. 101.

[6]Jacob Klaassen, Martin Klaassen and Jacob Klaassen, The Klaassen Family History Book from 1680 (unpublished family history located in Cordell, Okla.), p. 15. The first Jacob Klaassen is the grandfather of the second.

[7]Ibid., pp. 34-35.

[8]Ibid., p. 36.

[9]Ibid., p. 51.

[10]C. Henry Smith, The Story of the Mennonites (Berne, Ind., 1941), p. 395.

[11]C. Henry Smith, The Coming of the Russian Mennonites (Berne, Ind., 1927), p. 21.

[12]Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 394.

[13]Hale, "From Central Asia to America," p. 135.

[14]Jacob Klaassen et al., The Klaassen Family History Book, p. 73.

[15]Ibid., p. 74.

[16]Interview with Matha Horn, Cordell, Oklahoma, July 1, 1974.

[17]Jacob Klaassen, "Memories and Notations About My Life," (unpub. mimeographed M.S., n.p., 1966), p. 1.

[18]Ibid., p. 2.

[19]Smith, The Coming of the Russian Mennonites, p. 48.

[20]Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 641.

[21]Ibid., p. 660.

[22]Belk, "The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites," pp. 63-70.

[23]Jacob Klaassen, "Memoirs of Our Emigration to Asia," (unpub. mimeographed M.S., n.p., 1964), pp. 3-4.

[24]Ibid., p. 9.

[25]Ibid., p. 17.

[26]Ibid., pp. 24-25.

[27]Ibid., p. 25.

[28]Ibid., p. 30.

[29]Ibid., p. 33.

[30]Ibid., p. 36.

[31]Ibid., p. 42.

[32]Ibid., p. 44.

[33]Belk, "The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites," p. 290.

[34]Jacob Klaassen, "Memoirs of Our Emigration to Asia," p. 56.

[35]Jacob Klaassen, "Memories and Notations About My Life," p. 4.

[36]Ibid., p. 5.

[37]Ibid., p. 6.

[38]Ibid., p. 7.

[39]Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 661.

[40]Jacob Klaassen, "Memories and Notations About My Life," p. 11.

[41]Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[42]John W. Arn, The Herold Mennonite Church 70th Anniversary(1899-1969) (North Newton, Kans., 1969), p. 2.

[43]Ibid., p. 3.

[44]Ibid., p. 4.

[45]Ibid., p. 6.

[46]Jacob Klaassen, "Memories and Notations About My Life,", p. 12.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Harold S. Bender and C. Henry Smith, eds., The Mennonite Encyclopedia (Scottdale, Penn., 1959), Vol. 4, p. 33.

[49]Ibid. p. 36.

[50]Jacob Klaassen, "Memories and Notations About My Life," p. 13.

[51]Arn, The Herold Mennonite Church 70th Anniversary, p. 11.

[52]Jacob Klaassen, "Memories and Notations About My Life," p. 16.

[53]James Henry Fowler, II, "Extralegal Suppression of Civil Liberties in Oklahoma During the First World War and Its Causes" (unpub. Master's thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1974), p.63.

[54]Arn, The Herold Mennonite Church 70th Anniversary, p. 17.

[55]Jacob Klaassen, "Memories and Notations About My Life," p. 17.

[56]Ibid., p. 18.

[57]Jacob Klaassen et al., The Klaassen Family History Book, p. 91.

[58]Ibid., p. 92.

CHAPTER IV

DIETRICH EHRLICH: THE LEGACY OF A RUSSIAN-GERMAN ON THE OKLAHOMA PRAIRIE

What is Oklahoma without its people? It is nothing more than a geographical location, bounded by the great Red River on the south, the Ozark mountains of the east, the Kansas prairies to the north, and the Texas panhandle to the west. But it is the people who comprise that area that makes Oklahoma meaningful. It is people of different social, ethnic, and racial communities that comprise a unit which we call Oklahoma. The distinctions of racial and ethnic communities and the particular role each has played in the growth of Oklahoma cannot be overlooked, for their contributions are many. One such group that has greatly contributed into making Oklahoma a state to be proud of is the Russian-German element.

A large number of Russian immigrants of German ancestry flocked into Oklahoma after the initial land rush of 1889 and continued to take advantage of new land openings and homesteading rights until statehood in 1907.[1] One of the most significant areas of settlement was in northwestern Oklahoma near Wolf Creek in Ellis County, not far from the Texas border.[2] Though the whole area is dotted with descendants of the Russian-German element, the town of Shattuck, in particular, became the recipient of a large number of these early immigrants. A casual observance of Shattuck leads one to suspect that it is not unlike any

other community of two thousand. Perhaps the busy atmosphere of the downtown area and the well-equipped, expertly staffed hospital in this small town seem somewhat unique, but a closer examination reveals another interesting aspect of this community that makes it different. In walking down main street you might overhear two old-timers conversing in German, or make a purchase from George Schultz's General Merchandising Store; or you might simply take a telephone directory and notice the listing of names, names such as Ludwig Appel, Herman Behrens, Gustav Borth, Dietrich D. Ehrlich, Henry Kelln, George Laubhan, Reinhart Meier, Fred Schibbelhute, Johannas Schoenhals, and many others.[3] This tells you the community is unique, and that behind each name lies a fascinating history of an immigrant family's journey from an old land beset by numerous problems to a new land where one was allowed to seek out new opportunities and hope for new beginnings.

One such immigrant was Dietrich Ehrlich. He was not selected because he was outstanding or because of his contribution in the making of a strong nation. He was not selected because of the hardships he had to bear, rather he was selected almost at random as a representative of the Russian-German element in Oklahoma. For he in so many ways typifies the hard-working and pious Russian-German who considered it a privilege to call northwestern Oklahoma his home.

A study of the Russian-German element in Oklahoma must, of necessity, begin in Germany. The Russian-Germans now located in the Shattuck area can trace their origins to a distinct location in Germany. Most came from the province of Starkenburg, in the state of Hesse, some twenty miles south of the present city of Frankfurt. This is the area from which the Ehrlich family originated.

Dietrich Ehrlich's great-great-grandfather was a nobleman who lived along the Rhine River near the city of Darmstadt, and was perhaps one of the wealthiest nobles in the area. In Darmstadt today there is still an Ehrlich Strasse (street).[5] It was a custom among noble families to associate only with other nobility, and marriages outside this class were strictly forbidden. But one of Ehrlich's sons, Georg, fell in love with a servant girl who worked within the household. A bitter struggle between father and son ensued; Georg was determined to marry the girl despite his father's wishes. Consequently, he was disinherited and dismissed from the Ehrlich household. Undaunted, Georg and his young bride joined a group of immigrants on their way to Russia, and landed in Tscherbaskobska in 1764.[6]

The immigration to Russia coincided with the conclusion of the Seven Years War (1756-1763). This had been a general European conflict, but the primary theme was the struggle for supremacy in Germany between Prussia under Frederick II, and Austria under Maria Theresa. The last years of the war were characterized by a series of Prussian defeats, the burning of Berlin in 1760, and the utter devastation of the Prussian countryside. Though Prussia amazingly lost no territory at the conclusion of the war, the disastrous condition of Prussian agriculture encouraged many German peasants to seek out a new livelihood elsewhere.[7] The benevolent immigration policies and the manifesto concerning colonization issued by Catherine II further encouraged those who hesitated.

The effect of the manifesto upon the peasant population of Germany was extremely significant. The devastation wrought by the Seven Years' War, the burden of taxation and conscription to support that war, and the shortages of food and other necessities had left many in a state of

great despair and hopelessness.[8] The result was the formation of emigrant parties much like the one joined by Georg Ehrlich. Emigration became so widespread that the German governments introduced measures to prohibit it.

The Volga River Valley was settled by many people from a number of countries, but it was predominantly the German element that introduced significant settlements to both sides of the river. Georg Ehrlich settled on the hilly side, or west bank of the Volga, approximately fifty to seventy-five miles from the city of Saratov, an important Volga River port, and about four hundred and fifty miles southeast of Moscow. It was here that the German immigrants established the village of Tscherbaskobska.[9] The first years were extremely hard, and the immigrant community witnessed the death of many of its members. The harsh winter, poor shelters, and lack of food caused great suffering. Though the Russian government had promised relief, it did not come to the village of Tscherbaskobska. Perseverance and hard work led to better things, and after a couple of years, the community began to prosper and grow.[10]

The lives of Georg Ehrlich and his wife were cut short by the bubonic plague. The plague had ravaged Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as late as 1771 more than 60,000 people had died of an outbreak in Moscow. It is not known what effect the plague had on the village of Tscherbaskobska, only that the Ehrlich family was snuffed out except for one infant son named Peter.[11] Peter was adopted by a Russian Jewish family of a neighboring community who cared for his needs until he reached maturity. This family allowed Peter the opportunity to receive an education, and he returned to Tscherbaskobska an educated man and served as a teacher in the local German

school.[12] Here he met his wife, Mary Kathryn, and the two settled down to life in this small German village on the Volga River.

Life in the village (Dorf) was primitive and the hardships numerous. Homes were usually built of earth and logs or whatever was at hand. A number of German villages dotted the Volga River Valley, with each village located some six to ten miles apart. These were usually situated along some small tributary of the great river. The village nearest Tscherbaskobska was Holstein, so named for the German village of Holstein from which this particular group had come. In fact, many of these same villagers would later leave Russia and begin a new Holstein on the Oklahoma prairie.[13]

Each village established its own local government which operated independently of the tsar's bureaucracy, a privilege granted by Catherine's manifesto. The German village leader was called the Schulz and was elected by the landowners of the community. The local government had jurisdiction over misdemeanors and carried out the responsibilities for roads, schools, poor relief, and control of commonly held lands. An Oberschulz often supervised the affairs of a number of communities and had the power of corporal punishment. Other administrative matters fell under the jurisdiction of the Russian government through a supervisory commission or executive corporation, usually headed by a German.[14] The village also served as the cultural and religious center of the area. Many people never left their native village, and this type of isolation led to the development of different dialects of the German language spoken in each Dorf. One could tell the Dorf a person was from by his dialect.[15]

After the families were established and became adjusted to life in

the Volga Valley, conditions quickly improved. The majority achieved a respectable living standard that was much higher than that of their Russian neighbors. The soil produced an abundance of wheat, oats, barley, and a kind of millet called herscha.[16] Private orchards and garden plots were also very productive, often yielding an over-abundant food supply, and many ways were found to store surplus foodstuffs for the long winter months. Fruits were often dried and sometimes canned or pickled in earthen jars. The ever popular kraut was put away in barrels. The process by which the families kept perishables is worth mentioning. Each family had their own meat, as well as cheese and butter. Naturally, this kept well during the winter months; to insure preservation in the summer, large caves were filled with ice and then insulated with hay and straw. By this method perishable items were kept cool and ice was still available at the end of summer.[17] Flour was ground at the flour mill and placed in bags. The busy atmosphere of the village is typified by Tscherbaskobska, which had a total of thirty-four mills, including not only flour mills, but also saw mills and spinning and weaving mills. The power source for these mills originated from a great spring in the nearby hills that gushed out a stream of water some thirty-six inches in diameter.[18]

Flocks of sheep were kept by each family, and the wool provided them with the necessary clothing. Hides were also tanned and made into leather to serve as footwear and outer clothing. For winter coats, hides were tanned with the hair left on them and often had an inner lining of wool. These overcoats (dulips) were especially made for the men and provided a warm garment for the harsh Russian winters. Soft hides were also used for robes (banchucks) and gloves.[19]

For a family to be this self-sufficient, it had to be large; this became a distinctive characteristic of these German immigrants. Families were extremely large, and twelve children in a family were not uncommon. Each home was a unit in itself, designed in a square form that maintained living quarters, barn, stables and workshops all under one continuous roof. These were very often surrounded by high walls and gates to keep out prowlers and intruders. Sons often lived at home until they were middle-aged and had families of their own. Though this might have occasioned family squabbles, little difficulty arose because the old father was the supreme ruler of the household. His word was law, and his decision was final. When the father died, the eldest son assumed this patriarchal position.[20]

The chief mode of transportation between villages was the sleigh or boat, and the Volga River was the great artery of transportation. Roads hardly existed from one village to another, and during the harsh winters when temperatures rarely rose above freezing, the frozen Volga served as a highway traversed by horses and sleighs. With the warm temperatures of summer, the Volga again flowed freely, and the river boat became the major means of transportation.[21]

The opportunities that presented themselves in the village led Peter Ehrlich into a new profession. Giving up teaching, Peter soon found a profitable livelihood in the business of hides and tanning. By this time Peter had two sons, George and John, who assisted their father in his trade. The hide and tanning business required a considerable amount of travel among villages, and George and John became the traders and did most of the travelling. When winter came, the two loaded their sleighs with leather and bolts of homespun fabrics and set out to trade with

neighboring villages in hopes of securing gold and silver, raw materials, or at least a good story. Their travels were not limited to the German villages, as the desire for greater profits brought them into contact with many of the Russian villages, and the Ehrlichs learned the Russian language quite fluently. Experiences on the Volga frontier were often dangerous as well as exciting, and the stories told in the home of a customer in some isolated Russian village later found their way to the United States.[22]

One of the greatest dangers came from the fierce timber wolves, especially if the winters were severe. Many times the Ehrlich brothers would run across a pack of thirty or forty hungry timber wolves, and it would become a life and death struggle. The leader of the pack was shot, and the scent of blood brought all the other wolves down upon the wounded animal. Sometimes this process was repeated several times before reaching the safety of the next village. Another danger came from the nomadic tribes and robbers in the area; most worrisome were the Khirghiz tribes. These bands stole horses for the most part, but sometimes kidnapped young children. To escape from danger, sleighs and wagons were drawn by three horses called a troika, with the largest horse placed in the center between two wooden shafts with a bow over the horse's neck. The other horses were hitched to each side of this bow horse. The good swift horses of the German settlers were the object of many a Khirghiz raid. The nomads usually tried to cut one of the side horses loose from the bow horse. The best defense against this sort of robbery was the whip, and John D. Ehrlich was a fearless and skillful master of this weapon.[23]

Life in the community of Tscherbaskobska was more than satisfying

for Peter Ehrlich's family. Their business had been prosperous, and though the winters were harsh on the Volga frontier, they had adjusted very well. But during the 1870s, certain circumstances prompted Peter Ehrlich's decision to emigrate. The major controversy for the Ehrlich family centered on the Lutheran Church. The church was the social and cultural center of each village, and the school was operated by the church. Both the village pastor and schoolmaster were very important to the welfare of the village. Since the Ehrlich family had accepted the Baptist faith, they became the object of some persecution from the Lutherans. This is perhaps the reason why Peter Ehrlich had stopped teaching and entered the tanning profession.[24] At one time, Peter's son, John, was placed in the village jail for his outspoken comments concerning spiritual interpretations. Religious difficulty within the community itself was one factor that led to the decision to emigrate. The decision was also influenced by the governments' Russification program, and a large number of Germans decided to leave the Empire.

Of course, not all German settlers moved away; the Ehrlichs still have relatives living in Russia even today. The Russian Civil War (1918-1921) was particularly hard on the German element, and many died of hunger and lack of medical care; a number of the old villages simply vanished. The German element and their progeny that elected to stay in Russia also suffered during the Second World War. Not sure of the loyalty of these people, the Russian government sent many to the Siberian frontier, adding yet another sad chapter to the saga of the Russian German.[25]

Those who did leave were eager for the new opportunity that the United States offered. It took an adventurous and an ambitious person

to pack up and move, but an effort to better their livelihood and search for more tolerable surroundings made this adventurous people willing to take the first step. In 1878, because of the precarious position of the villages' autonomy, Peter Ehrlich decided to emigrate. By this time, Peter's sons had families of their own, and each would have to make his own decision on emigration. Peter's second son, John D., decided to emigrate in 1891. John, with his wife and two sons, Dietrich and Peter, set out by wagon that spring for the city of Kamyshinn. From Kamyshinn they took a train to the German port of Bremen, where they boarded a freighter bound for New York. The long six-week voyage was marred by tragedy for John and his wife, as their infant son Peter became ill and died at sea. Finally, the journey came to a conclusion when the freighter docked in New York and the immigrants made their way to Ellis Island to secure proper entry into the United States. Here they were met by friends from the Kansas prairie, and the Ehrlich family boarded a train and made the cross-country journey to Lehigh, Kansas.[26]

Arrival at the new homesites on the western plains was somewhat similar to that experienced by their ancestors in Russia a century earlier. Women wept when they saw the family plot of land, knowing that construction of a new home would have to wait until the soil had been broken and crops sown. In the case of the Ehrlich family, it would be several harvests before a house became financially practical. The prosperous years in the tanning business at Tscherbaskobska were replaced by some lean years on the Kansas plains. But the immigrants' expectations of new freedoms and opportunities were fulfilled.

Three Ehrlich families had made the decision to emigrate, the elder Peter, and his two sons, George and John. At Lehigh, they continued in

the tanning business, but John's twenty-four-year-old son, Dietrich, turned his attention toward farming. However, the scarcity of available farming land in Kansas was not in his favor. Dietrich's determination forced him to seek odd jobs wherever they could be found. For several years he worked on the railroad lines as a construction laborer; he was employed for two more by a farmer named Henry Klein. The working hours were long, and the pay was negligible. After ten years on the Kansas prairie, Dietrich was as far away from owning his own farm as he had been the day he had registered at Ellis Island.[27]

But to the south of Kansas lay the Oklahoma territory and the prospects of free land, a prospect that seemed somewhat brighter than tenant farming in Kansas. This land had been made available by the opening of the Cherokee Outlet, and a few homesteads in far western Oklahoma, near Shattuck, were still available. The Shattuck area seems a very unlikely place for settlement. With an annual average of less than twenty inches of rainfall in this Texas-Oklahoma borderland, there was some question of whether 160 acres of land would be sufficient to make farming practical. But events of the previous thirty-five years had destined Shattuck to be the recipient of a sizeable group of perspective farmers. Between 1866 and 1885 the Shattuck area had been the hub of great cattle trails when the Cherokee Outlet had been used for grazing purposes. In fact, the Dominion Cattle Company was able to lease most of the land in northwestern Oklahoma from the Cherokees. Another important development in the growth of the Shattuck area came with the completion of the Kiowa Extension line of the Santa Fe Railroad to Shattuck in 1887. The importance of the area was further enhanced by the opening of the Cheyenne-Arapaho lands in 1892 and the settlement of the Cherokee Outlet

the following year. The land run into the Cherokee Outlet was the greatest in history, with some 150,000 participants. The Free Homestead Bill would continue to attract settlers into this region, including two particularly significant immigrant waves to the Shattuck area in the years 1900 and 1902.[28]

Shattuck received its name from a director of the Santa Fe Railroad, George O. Shattuck. Though a post-office was not established until 1893, and the city was not incorporated until 1906, Shattuck was a bustling, progressive town at the time of statehood in 1907.[29] This was chiefly due to the hard work of the immigrant farming community that surrounded the young town. The development of drought-resistant crops such as broom corn, kaffir corn, and milo maize had much to do with the development of Shattuck. In fact, Shattuck became known as the "broom corn capital of the world ".[30]

Dietrich moved to the Shattuck area of Ellis County in 1901 along with his wife Anna and five children. His father, John D., also decided to make the trip, but the elder Peter and his wife had passed away before the exodus to Oklahoma began, and were buried in a cemetery near Lehigh. Many other immigrants in Marion County, Kansas, had decided to take advantage of free lands in Oklahoma, and the Santa Fe Railroad was commissioned to make up special trains to carry the immigrants and their possessions to the Shattuck area. Livestock cars were provided, and Dietrich often went to the cars for milk to provide sustenance for his family. The train which carried Dietrich and his family arrived on an April evening in 1901. They remained in the station until morning, and then, as they had been instructed previously by letter, a group of the men walked up the street searching for a German who could direct them

to a shop of a German merchant. They ended up in George Schultz's General Store, where they received the necessary information.[31]

This was a scene often repeated on the streets of Shattuck from 1900 to 1903, as word of the newly opened lands of Ellis County spread to friends and relatives, making Shattuck a destination for further immigration. Family records still describe the arrival of new immigrants clothed in their native garb, with women carrying what little money they had in the pockets of their long, full skirts.[32]

This is not to say that homesteading conditions were easy. Dietrich Ehrlich characterized the five-year occupancy requirement of the homestead plan "as a period of compulsory starvation".[33] Immigrants often spent the first few years in sod houses and dugouts while farming operations were begun. All the while, the Russian-Germans continued to extend their customary hospitality to newly arrived families, even to the extent of living with as many as thirty new arrivals in a dugout. Life on the plains had become possible only because of the development of the windmill in 1873,[34] and obtaining water was the first order of business for the pioneers. Dietrich dug his well by hand and was able to find a dependable water supply. This allowed him to be somewhat self-sufficient; it permitted him to raise a garden and care for livestock even when rainfall was abnormally low, especially during the first few years when drought conditions prevailed in the Shattuck area. Though homestead laws prohibited the type of compact communities which had existed in Russia, the Ehrlich family settled in the same vicinity, some five miles south of Shattuck. One section was quartered among four family heads that included Dietrich, his father John, and two uncles.[35]

The early pioneer days at Shattuck were filled with hardship and heartache, but the family developed with the land. During the first few years, Dietrich was unable to sustain his family by farming alone, but supplemented this meager income by building track for the Santa Fe Railroad, for which he received two dollars a day.[36] The first years were spent in a one-room lean-to, a very inadequate shelter, but it was necessary that the land receive the first priority. The first crops he planted were broom corn, kaffir corn, and maize. Kaffir corn and maize were cut by hand, and the heads were scattered in a circle around which paired horses were led repeatedly until threshing was complete. Though this method was time consuming and required a great deal of work, Dietrich could ill afford a threshing machine. Broom corn was cut by hand, and then the brush was pulled from the stock and placed in piles. This was then picked up and hauled to a stockyard where it was placed on racks to complete the curing process.[37]

The life of the Dietrich Ehrlich family was filled with hard work: each member of the family, from the youngest of the six children to father Dietrich, worked from daylight to dark. Dietrich was up and in the field by seven-thirty. The younger members of the family milked the cows, fed the horses, and then joined their father in the field. The young ones, starting at the age of six, would bring in coal and kindling, gather eggs, and do anything else that would help. There was always something to do, and the work was usually hard. Machines were never used--simply because Dietrich could not afford them. This was true of most immigrants, who despite their dedication to efficient farming, could not bear the expense of harvesting and threshing machines during the first few years.[38]

This hard work paid off, however, and in 1912 Dietrich erected a comfortable two-story house to replace the temporary dwelling that had served as the family home for eleven years. A bountiful broom corn crop in that year had been chiefly responsible for the construction of the new home. Dietrich's life was typical of the pioneer; he was spared a great deal of sickness and suffered but few instances of tragedy, but he became accustomed to poor times that required a great deal of hard work if one was to survive.

Dietrich lived on his original homestead until 1918, when he sold his place and moved to Colorado. There had been some discrimination against the German element during the war years--Dietrich's uncle had been threatened with lynching for possessing a photograph of the Kaiser--but this had no bearing on his decision to move. He migrated to Colorado because of the numerous dust storms that frequented the Oklahoma plains. This was causing him difficult eye problems, and he felt that a new climate and location would improve his condition. Dietrich, therefore, moved to the community of Brighton, north of Denver, where he purchased a quarter section of land. The geographical and climatic conditions in Colorado differed greatly from those in Oklahoma, and Dietrich raised such crops as sugar beets, alfalfa, wheat, and oats. But Colorado life was not all that sweet. While he was putting up hay one afternoon, a tremendous storm came and tore up the stack. Dietrich decided that if he "had to be in a storm it might as well be in Oklahoma".[39] Thus, after two years in Colorado, Dietrich Ehrlich came back to Oklahoma, where he bought a piece of land south and east of Shattuck. Here he continued farming until his retirement in 1938.[40]

Dietrich actually took a financial loss on his return to Oklahoma,

but the hard work of the previous years had allowed him to expand his original quarter-section homestead to an entire section of 640 acres. He had also been able to buy a few luxuries; he purchased his first automobile, a Buick, in 1916. It could hardly be termed a purchase, as he traded a team of mules plus some cash for the shiny new car.[41] Roads in 1916 were still trails, and the horse and wagon were often the most practical means of coming to town, especially when it rained and the deep ruts caused a car to "high center". Besides, there were few reasons to come to town; the children might visit the town only once a month. The community offered all the social life for which they had time. The Seventh Day Adventist Church, which had been started in 1901, was located less than a mile from the Ehrlich farm, and this was the center of both religious and social life. Dietrich Ehrlich had been a charter member of the church and was a devoutly religious man. This deep and abiding faith in God is one of the major characteristics of the Russian-German element.[42]

The decade of the 1920's was an especially good one for the Ehrlich family due to bumper crops in wheat during these years. A combination of cheap land, good wheat prices, and bountiful yields enabled them to exceed the standard of living which had been maintained by their ancestors in Russia. Though the family was not so prosperous during the depression years, chiefly owing to a bank failure that wiped out their savings, they were able to sustain themselves adequately because they already owned their land. After 1938, Dietrich turned his holdings over to his two sons, John and Henry, and moved into Shattuck where he lived the remainder of his life.[43]

In 1948, at the age of seventy-nine years, Dietrich Ehrlich passed

away.[44] He had given forty-six years of his life into the making of western Oklahoma. His contribution was not one which shook the world, but one which typified the efforts of many an immigrant, who in an effort to better his own life, had indeed made America a better country.

In the summer of 1974 the author visited in the typically American home of John D. Ehrlich and asked him to recall those memories of his childhood, and in particular, to describe his mother and father. He remembered his mother as a woman who accepted the responsibilities of motherhood by caring constantly for her six children. He remembered her as a woman who possessed the determination and spirit necessary for the pioneer woman, a woman who was willing to work in the fields, tend the children, suffer the inconveniences of living in inadequate housing, and through her courage provide a word of optimism in a time of crisis.[45] Mr. Ehrlich described his father as

> a self educated man who could be kind yet stern, and though he had worked hard, he was content with the success he had in coming into this country. Relying on his German language and speaking only broken English, he sometimes talked about Russia, but never really wanted to go back. The old man, who wore a beard throughout his life, was remembered by his children as a devoted father who loved them dearly, but one who would not 'spare the rod'. In the community, he was a much respected, well-liked man who lived a morally upright life. To the church he was a devoted Christian who attempted to live according to God's will.[46]

In many ways he characterized those things which we consider admirable American qualities--hard work and honesty. This was the Russian-German in Oklahoma.

ENDNOTES

[1]Seth Corden and W. B. Richards, The Oklahoma Red Book (Tulsa, 1912), Vol. II, pp. xvii-xix.

[2]Donna Baker, Joanne Keith, and Noma Sprague, eds., A Pioneer History of Shattuck (Shattuck, Oklahoma, 1970), p. 6.

[3]Ibid., pp. 84-274.

[4]Interview with Mrs. Wesley Ehrlich, Shattuck, Oklahoma, August 20, 1974.

[5]H. L. Baker, The Ehrlich Family History Book (unpub. family history, Shattuck, Okla., 1968), p. 3.

[6]Ibid., p. 4.

[7]Herbert H. Kaplan, Russia and the Outbreak of the Seven Years' War (Berkeley, 1968), pp. 57-125.

[8]Baker, The Ehrlich Family History Book, pp. 5-6.

[9]Ibid., p. 5.

[10]Ibid., p. 6

[11]Ibid., p. 8.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., p. 9.

[14]Mrs. L. C. Montgomery and Dr. Austin H. Montgomery, Jr., "The Other Germans," State Historical Survey Committee of Texas (Libscomb County, Texas, 1970), p. 4.

[15]H. L. Baker, The Ehrlich Family History Book, p. 10.

[16]Ibid., p. 10.

[17]Ibid., p. 11.

[18]Ibid., p. 12.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Montgomery, "The Other Germans," p. 6.

[21]H. L. Baker, The Ehrlich Family History Book, p. 10.

[22]Ibid., p. 13.

[23]Ibid., p. 15.

[24]Ibid., p. 17.

[25]Ibid., p. 12.

[26]Ibid., p. 18.

[27]Interview with John D. Ehrlich, Shattuck, Oklahoma, August 20, 1974.

[28]Baker et al., eds., A Pioneer History of Shattuck, p. 16.

[29]Montgomery, "The Other Germans," p. 6.

[30]Baker et al., eds, A Pioneer History of Shattuck, pp. 16-17.

[31]Ibid., p. 24.

[32]Ibid., p. 27.

[33]Interview with John D. Ehrlich, Shattuck, Oklahoma, August 20, 1974.

[34]Montgomery, "The Other Germans," p. 8.

[35]H. L. Baker, The Ehrlich Family History Book, p. 15.

[36]Interview with John D. Ehrlich, Shattuck, Oklahoma, August 20, 1974.

[37]Baker et al., eds, A Pioneer History of Shattuck, pp. 44-46.

[38]Interview with John D. Ehrlich, Shattuck, Oklahoma, August 20, 1974.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Baker et al., eds., A Pioneer History of Shattuck, pp. 321-322.

[43]Interview with John D. Ehrlich, Shattuck, Oklahoma, August 20, 1974.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Volumes have been written about the importance of immigration in the development of America, and it rightfully deserves such attention. For unless the impact of immigration is understood, we cannot fully appreciate the factors that have shaped American society. The immigrant's untiring industry, his search for political freedoms, his escape from religious persecution, and his desire for a better livelihood seemed to reinforce basic American philosophy. Our strengths and many of our weaknesses are connected with the immigrant. For millions of Americans, the immigrant experience is a personal story, told by a father or grandfather. Though the Mid-Atlantic states were the greatest recipients of mass emigration from Europe, every state which comprises this nation has felt its impact. The United States is truly a nation of immigrants.

The settlement of one such state, Oklahoma, coincided with one of the great eras of emigration from Europe. It is no coincidence that this affected the development of the state. Unfortunately, this aspect of Oklahoma history has been largely ignored, and therefore, a full understanding of what forces shaped the development of Oklahoma remains incomplete. The purpose of this research has been an attempt to fill part of that void by examining the importance of one immigrant group.

For Oklahoma, the numerical importance of immigration from the Russian Empire was exceeded only by that of Germany, and the immigrants

from Russia provide an excellent subject for study. The diversity of this immigration allows one to better examine what contributions this particular group made to the state of Oklahoma. A brief look at three different themes will make this clear: settlement, economy, religion.

Oklahoma was not opened to white settlement before 1889, but when the final opening came, the immigrants from the Tsar's Empire were among the early pioneers. Significant numbers of Russian-Germans settled northwestern Oklahoma and the Panhandle area. The communities of Shattuck and Hooker are just two of a number of communities who owe much of their growth to the Russian-Germans. Russian Mennonites played a major role in developing the lands of western Oklahoma in the Weatherford-Clinton area, and in the development of north central Oklahoma in the Enid area. More than a dozen Oklahoma communities are readily identified as areas of Mennonite settlement. The southeastern part of the state received a number of Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian immigrants before statehood, and the town of Hartshorne owes much of its growth to these groups. The major cities of Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Muskogee also were affected by settlers from Russia. These settlers were not as numerous in the northeastern area of the state, but those who did reside in this area usually became a factor in its development.

The developing economy of the state was also enhanced by the immigrants' contributions. The Lithuanians provided a number of laborers in the mining districts of Coal County. The Russian Mennonites were a major factor in the development of wheat farming in western Oklahoma. Their introduction of a prolific strain of wheat called Turkey Red had a tremendous impact upon the agriculture industry. The Russian-Germans stimulated the growth of the farming industry through such products as

kaffir corn, maize, and broom corn. Their impact cannot be questioned, for they took the unwanted lands of western Oklahoma, not yet claimed in the land openings and not yet homesteaded, and made them productive. The Russian Jews were an important element in the development of the merchandising community in Oklahoma City and Muskogee, and were also early pioneers in the oil business of Tulsa.

Oklahoma has earned the reputation among fellow states as a conservative state, where religion plays a major role. This is in part due to the piety and religious convictions of the early settlers. The Russian Mennonites and the Russian Germans were two elements in which this trait was particularly noticeable. A number of Mennonite congregations, spread throughout western Oklahoma, aided the spiritual growth of many communities. In fact, much of the early mission work among the Indian tribes was a result of the early Mennonite missionaries. The Russian-Germans added a considerable number of Lutheran congregations and established some of the first Adventist congregations within the state. A Russian Orthodox Church was built in Oklahoma, one of the few west of the Mississippi River. Jewish temples were erected in a number of cities to serve the needs of the Jewish community. Thus, those settlers who came from Russia affected the spiritual growth of the Sooner state.

The impact of the immigrant extends to other fields, including government, social reform, and education. A number of immigrants were prominent in the early territorial government, and later in the state governments. Many descendants of these immigrants have become important leaders in our present state government. The area of political involvement was one scarcely touched in this paper, yet it is one worth further

study. Though the Russian element was not necessarily involved with social reform, many of the immigrant groups stimulated the reform movements in local and state government during the "Progressive Era" of the early twentieth century. To preserve much of their past heritage and religious beliefs many private schools were begun. This was especially true among the Russian German element. Just what effect his had upon further educational development has not been answered by this paper, but it is an aspect worthy of investigation. The role played by these elements during the two World Wars is also an area one might look at. We know that Jacob Klaassen and many other Mennonites suffered persecution because of their German background, but many others served their country well, and won plaudits for their display of patriotism.

The families studied in this research were not selected because of their outstanding accomplishments, but merely as representatives of three important elements of Russian immigration. Each story is different, and reflects the variety of circumstances that was peculiar to each group. The motives which prompted emigration were different for Ben May, Jacob Klaassen, and Dietrich Ehrlich. The Jews had been stripped of their civil liberties and the pogroms threatened their very survival. Emigration seemed almost a necessity for them. Jacob Klaassen and other Mennonites emigrated because of the Russification program attempted by the tsarist government. To maintain their German language and culture, to protect their local autonomy, and more importantly, to practice their religious convictions, emigration seemed the only alternative. A similar situation faced Dietrich Ehrlich and the Russian-German. For all three families, emigration from the Empire was final. There was no thought of returning and, in each case, it was a family venture. For these fami-

lies it was not economic difficulties that was the major factor in their decision to emigrate; rather it was irreconcilable political and religious differences.

The means of emigration varied with each family, but the element of hardship was present in each case. For Ben May it entailed hiring a guide to safely transport him across the border, and then making the long sea voyage in steerage. For Jacob Klaassen, it meant a journey through Turkestan and the loss of a father and older sister before finally arriving in America. For Dietrich Ehrlich, it meant a long six-week voyage by freighter and the death of a younger brother.

Once in America the families again faced early hardships common to most immigrants. Ben May, like many of his Jewish brethren, chose to become a part of urban America, and his problems centered around sweatshop labor, decent living quarters, and becoming an integral part of the urban community. For Jacob Klaassen and Dietrich Ehrlich, who chose rural life, it was a problem of finding suitable land and breaking the soil for the following harvests. Perhaps for the Mennonites the initial encounter with America was easiest. Characterized by their compact communities, they often had fellow members of their faith to meet them and help them adjust to the new land. Thus it was in the case of Jacob Klaassen. Ben May was greeted by no group, and his was definitely a learn-by-experience venture. Dietrich Ehrlich was also aided by fellow Russian-Germans once he arrived in the United States, though not to the same degree as the Russian Mennonites.

Perhaps it was this initial encounter that aided in the assimilation or lack of assimilation of these groups into the mainstream of American society. Ben May seems to best represent assimilation. It was only

during the first years in St. Louis that Ben was part of a concentrated ethnic community, and his position as an ambitious retail merchant no doubt prompted him to become as wholly American as possible. The Americanization of the family name attests to this assimilation. The Russian Germans also became a part of the mainstream of American society, though assimilation did not occur as rapidly with this group. It follows that the most compact group, the Russian Mennonites, would be the last group to become assimilated. This was almost entirely the result of their religious beliefs which encouraged a close knit community and continued use of the German language. Many churches still used the German language in their services some fifty years after their arrival in Oklahoma. This seems to indicate that religion did play an important role in determining the rate of assimilation of the early immigrant.

Finally, we must consider the question of what motivated these three groups to settle in Oklahoma. For Jacob Klaassen and Dietrich Ehrlich it was the desire to become landowners. These two men definitely represented the early pioneer in Oklahoma. They came before statehood and settled land where no white man had ever lived; they tilled soil which no plow had ever touched, and they built homes where no house had ever stood. For Ben May and his brothers, Oklahoma offered another opportunity. Oklahoma's population was expanding rapidly, and the boom brought by oil further enhanced the opportunities of the ambitious businessman. The May family took advantage of this to become prosperous merchandisers within the state.

Though all experienced setbacks, Oklahoma blessed them with moderate prosperity, and in turn, they gave the best years of their lives to Oklahoma. It was here they raised their families and it was here they

worked and played. The May Brothers Store of Bartlesville, the Herold Mennonite Church of Cordell, and the productive farmlands near Shattuck are living testimonials to the efforts of men like Ben May, Jacob Klaassen and Dietrich Ehrlich. Furthermore, these are but three of some five thousand personal stories which the immigrants from Russia to Oklahoma might offer. This similarly extends to other immigrant groups which helped shape the destiny of the state. To understand Oklahoma, we must examine the important contributions made by the immigrant.

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